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PART I

PROLOGUE

DR. NIKOLA

THE manager of the new Imperial Restaurant on the Thames Embankment went into his luxurious private office and shut the door. Having done so, he first scratched his chin reflectively, and then took a letter from the drawer in which it had reposed for more than two months and perused it carefully. Though he was not aware of it, this was the thirtieth time he had read it since breakfast that morning. And yet he was not a whit nearer understanding it than he had been at the beginning. He turned it over and scrutinized the back, where not a sign of writing was to be seen; he held it up to the window, as if he might hope to discover something from the water-mark; but there was nothing in either of these places of a nature calculated to set his troubled mind at rest. Then he took a magnificent repeater watch from his waistcoat pocket and glanced at the dial; the hands stood at half-past seven. He immediately threw the letter on the table, and as he did so his anxiety found relief in words.

"It's really the most extraordinary affair I ever had to do with," he remarked. "And as I've been in the business just three-and-thirty years at eleven a.m. next Monday morning, I ought to know something about it. I only hope I've done right, that's all."

As he spoke, the chief bookkeeper, who had the treble advantage of being tall, pretty, and just eight-and-twenty years of age, entered the room. She noticed the open letter and the look upon her chief's face, and her curiosity was proportionately excited.

"You seem worried, Mr. McPherson," she said tenderly, as she put down the papers she had brought in for his signature.

"You have just hit it, Miss O'Sullivan," he answered, pushing them farther on to the table. "I am worried about many things, but particularly about this letter."

He handed the epistle to her, and she, being desirous of impressing him with her business capabilities, read it with ostentatious care. But it was noticeable that when she reached the signature she too turned back to the beginning, and then deliberately read it over again. The manager rose, crossed to the mantelpiece, and rang for the head waiter. Having relieved his feelings in this way, he seated himself again at his writing-table, put on his glasses, and stared at his companion, while waiting for her to speak.

"It's very funny," she said. "Very funny indeed!"

"It's the most extraordinary communication I have ever received," he replied with conviction. "You see it is written from Cuyaba, Brazil. The date is three months ago to a day. Now I have taken the trouble to find out where and what Cuyaba is."

He made this confession with an air of conscious pride, and having done so, laid himself back in his chair, stuck his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and looked at his fair subordinate for approval. Nor was he destined to be disappointed. He was a bachelor in possession of a snug income, and she, besides being pretty, was a lady with a keen eye to the main chance.

"And where is Cuyaba?" she asked humbly.

"Cuyaba," he replied, rolling his tongue with considerable relish round his unconscious mispronunciation of the name, "is a town almost on the western or Bolivian border of Brazil. It is of moderate size, is situated on the banks of the river Cuyaba, and is considerably connected with the famous Brazilian Diamond Fields."

"And does the writer of this letter live there?"

"I cannot say. He writes from there — that is enough for us."

"And he orders dinner for four — here, in a private room overlooking the river, three months ahead — punctually at eight o'clock, gives you a list of the things he wants, and even arranges the decoration of the table. Says he has never seen either of his three friends before; that one of them hails from (here she consulted the letter again) Hang-chow, another from Bloemfontein, while the third resides, at present, in England. Each one is to present an ordinary visiting card with a red dot on it to the porter in the hall, and to be shown to the room at once. I don't understand it at all."

The manager paused for a moment, and then said deliberately — "Hang-chow is in China, Bloemfontein is in South Africa."

"What a wonderful man you are, to be sure, Mr. McPherson! I never can *think* how you manage to carry so much in your head."

There spoke the true woman. And it was a move in the right direction, for the manager was susceptible to her gentle influence, as she had occasion to know.

At this juncture the head waiter appeared upon the scene, and took up a position just inside the doorway, as if he were afraid of injuring the carpet by coming farther.

"Is No. 22 ready, Williams?"

"Quite ready, sir. The wine is on the ice, and cook tells me he'll be ready to dish punctual to the moment."

"The letter says, 'no electric light; candles with red shades.' Have you put on those shades I got this morning?"

"Just seen it done this very minute, sir."

"And let me see, there was one other thing." He took the letter from the chief bookkeeper's hand and glanced at it. "Ah, yes, a porcelain saucer, and a small jug of new milk upon the mantelpiece. An extraordinary request, but has it been attended to?"

"I put it there myself, sir."

"Who wait?"

"Jones, Edmunds, Brooks, and Tomkins."

"Very good. Then I think that will do. Stay! You had better tell the hall porter to look out for three gentlemen presenting plain visiting cards with a little red spot on them. Let Brooks wait in the hall, and when they arrive tell him to show them straight up to the room."

"It shall be done, sir."

The head waiter left the room, and the manager stretched himself in his chair, yawned by way of showing his importance, and then said solemnly —

"I don't believe they'll any of them turn up; but if they do, this Dr. Nikola, whoever he may be, won't be able to find fault with my arrangements."

Then, leaving the dusty high road of Business, he and his companion wandered in the shady bridle-paths of Love — to the end that when the chief bookkeeper returned to her own department she had forgotten the strange dinner party about to take place upstairs, and was busily engaged upon a calculation as to how she would look in white satin and orange blossoms, and, that settled, fell to wondering whether it was true, as Miss Joyce, a subordinate, had been heard to declare, that the manager had once shown himself partial to a certain widow with reputed savings and a share in an extensive egg and dairy business.

At ten minutes to eight precisely a hansom drew up at the steps of the hotel. As soon as it stopped, an undersized gentleman, with a clean shaven countenance, a canonical corporation, and bow legs, dressed in a decidedly clerical garb, alighted. He paid and discharged his cabman, and then took from his ticket pocket an ordinary white visiting card, which he presented to the gold-laced individual who had opened the apron. The latter, having noted the red spot, called a waiter, and the reverend gentleman was immediately escorted upstairs.

Hardly had the attendant time to return to his station in the hall, before a second cab made its appearance, closely followed by a third. Out of the second jumped a tall, active, well-built man of about thirty years of age. He was dressed in evening dress of the latest fashion, and to conceal it from the vulgar gaze, wore a large Inverness cape of heavy texture. He also in his turn handed a white card to the porter, and, having done so, proceeded into the hall, followed by the occupant of

the last cab, who had closely copied his example. This individual was also in evening dress, but it was of a different stamp. It was old-fashioned and had seen much use. The wearer, too, was taller than the ordinary run of men, while it was noticeable that his hair was snow-white, and that his face was deeply pitted with smallpox. After disposing of their hats and coats in an ante-room, they reached room No. 22, where they found the gentleman in clerical costume pacing impatiently up and down.

Left alone, the tallest of the trio, who for want of a better title we may call the Best Dressed Man, took out his watch, and having glanced at it, looked at his companions. "Gentlemen," he said, with a slight American accent, "it is three minutes to eight o'clock. My name is Eastover!"

"I'm glad to hear it, for I'm most uncommonly hungry," said the next tallest, whom I have already described as being so marked by disease. "My name is Prendergast!"

"We only wait for our friend and host," remarked the clerical gentleman, as if he felt he ought to take a share in the conversation, and then, as an afterthought, he continued, "My name is Baxter!"

They shook hands all round with marked cordiality, seated themselves again, and took it in turns to examine the clock.

"Have you ever had the pleasure of meeting our host before?" asked Mr. Baxter of Mr. Prendergast.

"Never," replied that gentleman, with a shake of his head. "Perhaps Mr. Eastover has been more fortunate?"

"Not I," was the brief rejoinder. "I've had to do with him off and on for longer than I care to reckon, but I've never set eyes on him up to date."

"And where may he have been the first time you heard from him?"

"In Nashville, Tennessee," said Eastover. "After that, Tahupapa, New Zealand; after that, Papeete, in the Society Islands; then Pekin, China. And you?"

"First time, Brussels; second, Monte Video; third, Mandalay, and then the Gold Coast, Africa. It's your turn, Mr. Baxter."

The clergyman glanced at the timepiece. It was exactly eight o'clock. "First time, Cabul, Afghanistan; second, Nijni Novgorod, Russia; third, Wilcannia, Darling River, Australia; fourth, Valparaiso, Chili; fifth, Nagasaki, Japan."

"He is evidently a great traveller and a most mysterious person."

"He is more than that," said Eastover with conviction; "he is late for dinner!"

Prendergast looked at his watch.

"That clock is two minutes fast. Hark, there goes Big Ben! Eight exactly."

As he spoke the door was thrown open and a voice announced "Dr. Nikola."

The three men sprang to their feet simultaneously, with exclamations of astonishment, as the man they had been discussing made his appearance.

It would take more time than I can spare the subject to give you an adequate and inclusive description of the person who entered the room at that moment. In stature he was slightly above the ordinary, his shoulders were broad, his limbs perfectly shaped and plainly muscular, but very slim. His head, which was magnificently set upon his shoulders, was adorned with a profusion of glossy black hair; his face was destitute of beard or moustache, and was of oval shape and handsome moulding; while his skin was of a dark olive hue, a colour which harmonized well with his piercing black eyes and pearly teeth. His hands and feet were small, and the greatest dandy must have admitted that he was irreproachably dressed, with a neatness that bordered on the puritanical. In age he might have been anything from eight-and-twenty to forty; in reality he was thirty-three. He advanced into the room and walked with out-stretched hand directly across to where Eastover was standing by the fireplace.

"Mr. Eastover, I feel certain," he said, fixing his glittering eyes upon the man he addressed, and allowing a curious smile to play upon his face.

"That is my name, Dr. Nikola," the other answered with evident surprise. "But how on earth can you distinguish me from your other guests?"

"Ah! it would surprise you if you knew. And Mr. Prendergast, and Mr. Baxter. This is delightful; I hope I am not late. We had a collision in the Channel this morning, and I was almost afraid I might not be up to time. Dinner seems ready; shall we sit down to it?" They seated themselves, and the meal commenced. The Imperial Restaurant has earned an

enviable reputation for doing things well, and the dinner that night did not in any way detract from its lustre. But, delightful as it all was, it was noticeable that the three guests paid more attention to their host than to his excellent *menu*. As they had said before his arrival, they had all had dealings with him for several years, but what those dealings were they were careful not to describe. It was more than possible that they hardly liked to remember them themselves.

When coffee had been served and the servants had withdrawn, Dr. Nikola rose from the table, and went across to the massive sideboard. On it stood a basket of very curious shape and workmanship. This he opened, and as he did so, to the astonishment of his guests, an enormous cat, as black as his master's coat, leaped out on to the floor. The reason for the saucer and jug of milk became evident.

Seating himself at the table again, the host followed the example of his guests and lit a cigar, blowing a cloud of smoke luxuriously through his delicately chiselled nostrils. His eyes wandered round the cornice of the room, took in the pictures and decorations, and then came down to meet the faces of his companions. As they did so, the black cat, having finished its meal, sprang on to his shoulder to crouch there, watching the three men through the curling smoke drift with its green blinking, fiendish eyes. Dr. Nikola smiled as he noticed the effect the animal had upon his guests.

"Now shall we get to business?" he said briskly.

The others almost simultaneously knocked the ashes off their cigars and brought themselves to attention. Dr. Nikola's dainty, languid manner seemed to drop from him like a cloak, his eyes brightened, and his voice, when he spoke, was clean cut as chiselled silver.

"You are doubtless anxious to be informed why I summoned you from all parts of the globe to meet me here to-night? And it is very natural you should be. But then, from what you know of me, you should not be surprised at anything I do."

His voice dropped back into its old tone of gentle languor. He drew in a great breath of smoke and then sent it slowly out from his lips again. His eyes were half closed, and he drummed with one finger on the table edge. The cat looked through the smoke at the three men, and it seemed to them that he grew every moment larger and more ferocious. Presently his owner took him from his perch, and seating him on his knee fell to stroking his fur, from head to tail, with his long slim fingers. It was as if he were drawing inspiration for some deadly mischief from the uncanny beast.

"To preface what I have to say to you, let me tell you that this is by far the most important business for which I have ever required your help. (Three slow strokes down the centre of the back, and one round each ear.) When it first came into my mind I was at a loss who to trust in the matter. I thought of Vendon, but I found Vendon was dead. I thought of Brownlow, but Brownlow was no longer faithful. (Two strokes down the back and two on the throat.) Then bit by bit I remembered you. I was in Brazil at the time. So I sent for you. You came. So far so good."

He rose, and crossed over to the fireplace. As he went the cat crawled back to its original position on his shoulder. Then his voice changed once more to its former business-like tone.

"I am not going to tell you very much about it. But from what I do tell you, you will be able to gather a great deal and imagine the rest. To begin with, there is a man living in this world to-day who has done me a great and lasting injury. What that injury is is no concern of yours. You would not understand if I told you. So we'll leave that out of the question. He is immensely rich. His cheque for £300,000 would be honoured by his bank at any minute. Obviously he is a power. He has had reason to know that I am pitting my wits against his, and he flatters himself that so far he has got the better of me. That is because I am drawing him on. I am maturing a plan which will make him a poor and a very miserable man at one and the same time. If that scheme succeeds, and I am satisfied with the way you three men have performed the parts I shall call on you to play in it, I shall pay to each of you the sum of £10,000. If it doesn't succeed, then you will each receive a thousand and your expenses. Do you follow me?"

It was evident from their faces that they hung upon his every word.

"But, remember, I demand from you your whole and entire labour. While you are serving me you are mine body and soul. I know you are trustworthy. I have had good proof that you are — pardon the expression — unscrupulous, and I flatter myself you are silent. What is more, I shall tell you nothing beyond what is necessary for the carrying out of my scheme, so that you could not betray me if you would. Now for my plans!"

He sat down again and took a paper from his pocket. Having perused it, he turned to Eastover.

"You will leave at once — that is to say, by the boat on Wednesday — for Sydney. You will book your passage to-morrow morning, first thing, and join her in Plymouth. You will meet me to-morrow evening at an address I will send you,

and receive your final instructions. Good-night.”

Seeing that he was expected to go, Eastover rose, shook hands, and left the room without a word. He was too astonished to hesitate or to say anything.

Nikola took another letter from his pocket and turned to Prendergast. “You will go down to Dover to-night, cross to Paris to-morrow morning, and leave this letter personally at the address you will find written on it. On Thursday, at half-past two precisely, you will deliver me an answer in the porch at Charing Cross. You will find sufficient money in that envelope to pay all your expenses. Now go!”

“At half-past two you shall have your answer. Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

When Prendergast had left the room, Dr. Nikola lit another cigar and turned his attentions to Mr. Baxter.

“Six months ago, Mr. Baxter, I found for you a situation as tutor to the young Marquis of Beckenham. You still hold it, I suppose?”

“I do.”

“Is the father well disposed towards you?”

“In every way. I have done my best to ingratiate myself with him. That was one of your instructions.”

“Yes, yes! But I was not certain that you would succeed. If the old man is anything like what he was when I last met him he must still be a difficult person to deal with. Does the boy like you?”

“I hope so.”

“Have you brought me his photograph as I directed?”

“I have. Here it is.”

Baxter took a photograph from his pocket and handed it across the table.

“Good. You have done very well, Mr. Baxter. I am pleased with you. To-morrow morning you will go back to Yorkshire —”

“I beg your pardon, Bournemouth. His Grace owns a house near Bournemouth, which he occupies during the summer months.”

“Very well — then to-morrow morning you will go back to Bournemouth and continue to ingratiate yourself with father and son. You will also begin to implant in the boy’s mind a desire for travel. Don’t let him become aware that his desire has its source in you — but do not fail to foster it all you can. I will communicate with you further in a day or two. Now go.”

Baxter in his turn left the room. The door closed. Dr. Nikola picked up the photograph and studied it.

“The likeness is unmistakable — or it ought to be. My friend, my very dear friend, Wetherell, my toils are closing on you. My arrangements are perfecting themselves admirably. Presently, when all is complete, I shall press the lever, the machinery will be set in motion, and you will find yourself being slowly but surely ground into powder. Then you will hand over what I want, and be sorry you thought fit to baulk Dr. Nikola!”

He rang the bell and ordered his bill. This duty discharged, he placed the cat back in its prison, shut the lid, descended with the basket to the hall, and called a hansom. The porter inquired to what address he should order the cabman to drive. Dr. Nikola did not reply for a moment, then he said, as if he had been thinking something out: “The *Green Sailor* public-house, East India Dock Road.”



CHAPTER 1

I DETERMINE TO TAKE A HOLIDAY. — SYDNEY, AND WHAT BEFEL ME THERE

First and foremost, my name, age, description, and occupation, as they say in the *Police Gazette*. Richard Hatteras, at your service, commonly called Dick, of Thursday Island, North Queensland, pearler, copra merchant, *bêche-de-mer* and tortoiseshell dealer, and South Sea trader generally. Eight-and-twenty years of age, neither particularly good-looking nor, if some people are to be believed, particularly amiable, six feet two in my stockings, and forty-six inches round the chest; strong as a Hakodate wrestler, and perfectly willing at any moment to pay ten pounds sterling to the man who can put me on my back.

And big shame to me if I were not so strong, considering the free, open-air, devil-may-care life I've led. Why, I was doing man's work at an age when most boys are wondering when they're going to be taken out of knickerbockers. I'd been half round the world before I was fifteen, and had been wrecked twice and marooned once before my beard showed signs of sprouting. My father was an Englishman, not very much profit to himself, so he used to say, but of a kindly disposition, and the best husband to my mother, during their short married life, that any woman could possibly have desired. She, poor soul, died of fever in the Philippines the year I was born, and he went to the bottom in the schooner *Helen of Troy*, a degree west of the Line Islands, within six months of her decease; struck the tail end of a cyclone, it was thought, and went down, lock, stock, and barrel, leaving only one man to tell the tale. So I lost father and mother in the same twelve months, and that being so, when I put my cabbage-tree on my head it covered, as far as I knew, all my family in the world.

Any way you look at it, it's calculated to give you a turn; at fifteen years of age, to know that there's not a living soul on the face of God's globe that you can take by the hand and call relation. That old saying about "blood being thicker than water" is a pretty true one, I reckon: friends may be kind — they were so to me — but after all they're not the same thing, nor can they be, as your own kith and kin.

However, I had to look my trouble in the face, and stand up to it as a man should, and I suppose this kept me from brooding over my loss as much as I should otherwise have done. At any rate, ten days after the news reached me, I had shipped aboard the *Little Emily*, trading schooner, for Papeete, booked for five years among the islands, where I was to learn to water copra, to cook my balances, and to lay the foundation of the strange adventures that I am going to tell you about.

After my time expired and I had served my Trading Company on half the mudbanks of the Pacific, I returned to Australia and went up inside the Great Barrier Reef to Somerset — the pearling station that had just come into existence on Cape York. They were good days there then, before all the new-fangled laws that now regulate the pearling trade had come into force; days when a man could do almost as he liked among the islands in those seas. I don't know how other folk liked it, but the life just suited me — so much so that when Somerset proved inconvenient and the settlement shifted across to Thursday, I went with it, and, what was more to the point, with money enough at my back to fit myself out with a brand-new lugger and full crew, so that I could go pearling on my own account.

For many years I went at it head down, and this brings me up to four years ago, when I was a grown man, the owner of a house, two luggers, and as good a diving plant as any man could wish to possess. What was more, just before this I had put some money into a mining concern on the mainland, which had, contrary to most ventures of the sort, turned up trumps, giving me as my share the nice round sum of £5,000. With all this wealth at my back, and having been in harness for a greater number of years on end than I cared to count, I made up my mind to take a holiday and go home to England to see the place where my father was born, and had lived his early life (I found the name of it written in the fly-leaf of an old Latin book he left me), and to have a look at a country I'd heard so much about, but never thought to set my foot upon.

Accordingly I packed my traps, let my house, sold my luggers and gear, intending to buy new ones when I returned, said good-bye to my friends and shipmates, and set off to join an Orient liner in Sydney. You will see from this that I

intended doing the thing in style! And why not? I'd got more money to my hand to play with than most of the swells who patronize the first saloon; I had earned it honestly, and was resolved to enjoy myself with it to the top of my bent.

I reached Sydney a week before the boat was advertised to sail, but I didn't fret much about that. There's plenty to see and do in such a big place, and when a man's been shut away from theatres and amusements for years at a stretch, he can put in his time pretty well looking about him. All the same, not knowing a soul in the place, I must confess there were moments when I did think regretfully of the little island hidden away up north under the wing of New Guinea, of the luggers dancing to the breeze in the harbour, and the warm welcome that always awaited me among my friends in the saloons. Take my word for it, there's something in even being a leader on a small island. Anyway, it's better than being a deadbeat in a big city like Sydney, where nobody knows you, and your next-door neighbour wouldn't miss you if he never saw or heard of you again.

I used to think of these things as I marched about the streets looking in at shop windows, or took excursions up and down the harbour. There's no place like Sydney Harbour in the wide, wide world for beauty, and before I'd been there a week I was familiar with every part of it. Still, it would have been *more* enjoyable, as I hinted just now, if I had had a friend to tour about with me; and by the same token I'm doing one man an injustice.

There was *one* fellow, I remember, who did offer to show me round: I fell across him in a saloon in George Street. He was tall and handsome, and as spic and span as a new pin till you came to look under the surface. When he entered the bar he winked at the girl who was serving me, and as soon as I'd finished my drink asked me to take another with him. Seeing what his little game was, and wanting to teach him a lesson, I lured him on by consenting. I drank with him, and then he drank with me.

"Been long in Sydney?" he inquired casually, as he stroked his fair moustache.

"Just come in," was my reply.

"Don't you find it dull work going about alone?" he inquired. "I shall never forget my first week of it."

"You're about right," I answered. "It is dull! I don't know a soul, bar my banker and lawyer."

"Dear me!" (more curling of the moustache). "If I can be of any service to you while you're here, I hope you'll command me. I believe we're both Englishmen, eh?"

"It's very good of you," I replied modestly, affecting to be overcome by his condescension. "I'm just off to lunch. I am staying at the *Quebec*. Is it far enough for a hansom?" As he was about to answer, a lawyer, with whom I had done a little business the day before, walked into the room. I turned to my patronising friend and said, "Will you excuse me for one moment? I want to speak to this gentleman."

He was still all graciousness.

"I'll call a hansom and wait for you in it."

When he had left the saloon I spoke to the new arrival. He had noticed the man I had been talking to, and was kind enough to warn me against him.

"That man," he said, "bears a very bad reputation. He makes it his trade to meet new arrivals from England — weak-brained young pigeons with money. He shows them round Sydney, and plucks them so clean that, when they leave his hands, in nine cases out of ten, they haven't a feather left to fly with. You ought not, with your experience of rough customers, to be taken in by him."

"Nor am I," I replied. "I am going to teach him a lesson. Come with me."

Arm in arm we walked into the street, watched by Mr. Hawk from his seat in the cab. When we got there we stood for a moment chatting, and then strolled together down the pavement. Next moment I heard the cab coming along after us, and my friend hailing me in his silkiest tones; but though I looked him full in the face I pretended not to know him. Seeing this he drove past us — pulled up a little farther down and sprang out to wait for me.

"I was almost afraid I had missed you," he began, as we came up with him. "Perhaps as it is such a fine day you would rather walk than ride?"

"I beg your pardon," I answered. "I'm really afraid you have the advantage of me."

"But you have asked me to lunch with you at the *Quebec*. You told me to call a hansom."

"Pardon me again! but you are really mistaken. I said I was going to lunch at the *Quebec*, and asked you if it was far

enough to be worth while taking a hansom. That is your hansom, not mine. If you don't require it any longer, I should advise you to pay the man and let him go."

"You are a swindler, sir. I refuse to pay the cabman. It is your hansom."

I took a step closer to my fine gentleman, and, looking him full in the face, said as quietly as possible, for I didn't want all the street to hear:

"Mr. *Dorunda* Dodson, let this be a lesson to you. Perhaps you'll think twice next time before you try your little games on me!"

He stepped back as if he had been shot, hesitated a moment, and then jumped into his cab and drove off in the opposite direction. When he had gone I looked at my astonished companion.

"Well, now," he ejaculated at last, "how on earth did you manage that?"

"Very easily," I replied. "I happened to remember having met that gentleman up in our part of the world when he was in a very awkward position — very awkward. By his action just now I should say that he has not forgotten the circumstance any more than I have."

That was the first of the only two adventures of any importance I met with during my stay in New South Wales. And there's not much in that, I fancy I can hear you saying. Well, that may be so, I don't deny it, but it was nevertheless through that that I became mixed up with the folk who figure in this book, and indeed it was to that very circumstance, and that alone, I owe my connection with the queer story I have set myself to tell. And this is how it came about.

Three days before the steamer sailed, and about four o'clock in the afternoon, I chanced to be walking down Castlereagh Street, wondering what on earth I should do with myself until dinner-time, when I saw approaching me the very man whose discomfiture I have just described. Being probably occupied planning the plucking of some unfortunate new chum, he did not see me. And as I had no desire to meet him again, after what had passed between us, I crossed the road and meandered off in a different direction, eventually finding myself located on a seat in the Domain, lighting a cigarette and looking down over a broad expanse of harbour.

One thought led to another, and so I sat on and on long after dusk had fallen, never stirring until a circumstance occurred on a neighbouring path that attracted my attention. A young and well-dressed lady was pursuing her way in my direction, evidently intending to leave the park by the entrance I had used to come into it. But unfortunately for her, at the junction of two paths to my right, three of Sydney's typical larrikins were engaged in earnest conversation. They had observed the girl coming towards them, and were evidently preparing some plan for accosting her. When she was only about fifty yards away, two of them walked to a distance, leaving the third and biggest ruffian to waylay her. He did so, but without success; she passed him and continued her walk at increased speed.

The man thereupon quickened his pace, and, secure in the knowledge that he was unobserved, again accosted her. Again she tried to escape him, but this time he would not leave her. What was worse, his two friends were now blocking the path in front. She looked to right and left, and was evidently uncertain what to do. Then, seeing escape was hopeless, she stopped, took out her purse, and gave it to the man who had first spoken to her. Thinking this was going too far, I jumped up and went quickly across the turf towards them. My footsteps made no sound on the soft grass, and as they were too much occupied in examining what she had given them, they did not notice my approach.

"You scoundrels!" I said, when I had come up with them. "What do you mean by stopping this lady? Let her go instantly; and you, my friend, just hand over that purse."

The man addressed looked at me as if he were taking my measure, and were wondering what sort of chance he'd have against me in a fight. But I suppose my height must have rather scared him, for he changed his tone and began to whine.

"I haven't got the lady's purse, s'help me, I ain't! I was only a asking of 'er the time!"

"Hand over that purse!" I said sternly, approaching a step nearer to him.

One of the others here intervened — "Let's stowch 'im, Dog! There ain't a copper in sight!"

With that they began to close upon me. But, as the saying goes, "I'd been there before." I'd not been knocking about the rough side of the world for fifteen years without learning how to take care of myself. When they had had about enough of it, which was most likely more than they had bargained for, I took the purse and went to where the innocent cause of it all was standing. She was looking very white and scared, but she plucked up sufficient courage to thank me prettily.

I can see her now, standing there looking into my face with big tears in her pretty blue eyes. She was a girl of about twenty-one or two years of age — tall, but slenderly built, with a sweet oval face, bright brown hair, and the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen in my life. She was dressed in some dark green material, wore a fawn jacket, and, because the afternoon was cold, had a boa of marten fur round her neck. I can remember also that her hat was of some flimsy make, with lace and glittering spear points in it, and that the whole structure was surmounted by two bows, one of black ribbon, the other of salmon pink.

“Oh, how can I thank you?” she began, when I had come up with her. “But for your appearance I don’t know what those men might not have done to me.”

“I was very glad that I *was* there to help you,” I replied, looking into her face with more admiration for its warm young beauty than perhaps I ought to have shown. “Here is your purse. I hope you will find its contents safe. At the same time will you let me give you a little piece of advice. From what I have seen this afternoon this is evidently not the sort of place for a young lady to be walking in alone and after dark. I don’t think I would risk it again if I were you.”

She looked at me for a moment and then said:

“You are quite right. I have only myself to thank for my misfortune. I met a friend and walked across the green with her; I was on my way back to my carriage — which is waiting for me outside — when I met those men. However, I can promise you that it will not happen again. I am leaving Sydney in a day or two.”

Somehow, when I heard that, I began to feel glad I was booked to leave the place too. But of course I didn’t tell her so.

“May I see you safely to your carriage?” I said at last. “Those fellows may still be hanging about on the chance of overtaking you.”

Her courage must have come back to her, for she looked up into my face with a smile.

“I don’t think they will be rude to me again, after the lesson you have given them. But if you will walk with me I shall be very grateful.”

Side by side we proceeded down the path, through the gates and out into the street. A neat brougham was drawn up alongside the kerb, and towards this she made her way. I opened the door and held it for her to get in. But before she did so she turned to me and stretched out her little hand.

“Will you tell me your name, that I may know to whom I am indebted?”

“My name is Hatteras. Richard Hatteras, of Thursday Island, Torres Straits. I am staying at the *Quebec*.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hatteras, again and again. I shall always be grateful to you for your gallantry!”

This was attaching too much importance to such a simple action, and I was about to tell her so, when she spoke again: “I think I ought to let you know who I am. My name is Wetherell, and my father is the Colonial Secretary. I’m sure he will be quite as grateful to you as I am. Good-bye.”

She seemed to forget that we had already shaken hands, for she extended her own a second time. I took it and tried to say something polite, but she stepped into her carriage and shut the door before I could think of anything, and next moment she was being whirled away up the street.

Now old fogies and disappointed spinsters can say what they please about love at first sight. I’m not a romantic sort of person — far from it — the sort of life I had hitherto led was not of a nature calculated to foster a belief in that sort of thing. But if I wasn’t over head and ears in love when I resumed my walk that evening, well, I’ve never known what the passion is.

A daintier, prettier, sweeter little angel surely never walked the earth than the girl I had just been permitted the opportunity of rescuing, and from that moment forward I found my thoughts constantly reverting to her. I seemed to retain the soft pressure of her fingers in mine for hours afterwards, and as a proof of the perturbed state of my feelings I may add that I congratulated myself warmly on having worn that day my new and fashionable Sydney suit, instead of the garments in which I had travelled down from Torres Straits, and which I had hitherto considered quite good enough for even high days and holidays. That she herself would remember me for more than an hour never struck me as being likely.

Next morning I donned my best suit again, gave myself an extra brush up, and sauntered down town to see if I could run across her in the streets. What reason I had for thinking I should is more than I can tell you, but at any rate I was not destined to be disappointed. Crossing George Street a carriage passed me, and in it sat the girl whose fair image had exercised such an effect upon my mind. That she saw and recognized me was evidenced by the gracious bow and smile with

which she favoured me. Then she passed out of sight, and it was a wonder that that minute didn't see the end of my career, for I stood like one in a dream looking in the direction in which she had gone, and it was not until two carts and a brewer's wagon had nearly run me down that I realized it would be safer for me to pursue my meditations on the side walk.

I got back to my hotel by lunch-time, and during the progress of that meal a brilliant idea struck me. Supposing I plucked up courage and called? Why not? It would be only a polite action to inquire if she were any the worse for her fright. The thought was no sooner born in my brain than I was eager to be off. But it was too early for such a formal business, so I had to cool my heels in the hall for an hour. Then, hailing a hansom and inquiring the direction of their residence, I drove off to Potts Point. The house was the last in the street — an imposing mansion standing in well-laid-out grounds. The butler answered my ring, and in response to my inquiry dashed my hopes to the ground by informing me that Miss Wetherell was out.

"She's very busy, you see, at present, sir. She and the master leave for England on Friday in the *Orizaba*."

"What!" I cried, almost forgetting myself in my astonishment. "You don't mean to say that Miss Wetherell goes to England in the *Orizaba*?"

"I do, sir. And I do hear she's goin' 'ome to be presented at Court, sir!"

"Ah! Thank you. Will you give her my card, and say that I hope she is none the worse for her fright last evening?"

He took the card, and a substantial tip with it, and I went back to my cab in the seventh heaven of delight. I was to be shipmates with this lovely creature! For four weeks or more I should be able to see her every day! It seemed almost too good to be true. Instinctively I began to make all sorts of plans and preparations. Who knew but what — but stay, we must bring ourselves up here with a round turn, or we shall be anticipating what's to come.

To make a long story short — for it must be remembered that what I am telling you is only the prelude to all the extraordinary things that will have to be told later on — the day of sailing came. I went down to the boat on the morning of her departure, and got my baggage safely stowed away in my cabin before the rush set in.

About three o'clock we hove our anchor and steamed slowly down the Bay. I had been below when the Wetherells arrived on board, so the young lady had not yet become aware of my presence. Whether she would betray any astonishment when she did find out was beyond my power to tell; at any rate, I know that I was by a long way the happiest man aboard the boat that day. However, I was not to be kept long in suspense. Before we had reached the Heads it was all settled, and satisfactorily so. I was standing on the promenade deck, just abaft the main saloon entrance, watching the panorama spread out before me, when I heard a voice I recognized only too well say behind me:

"Good-bye to you, dear old Sydney. Great things will have happened when I set eyes on you again."

Little did she know how prophetic were her words. As she spoke I turned and confronted her. For a moment she was overwhelmed with surprise, then, stretching out her hand, she said:

"Really, Mr. Hatteras, this is most wonderful. You are the last person I expected to meet on board."

"And perhaps," I replied, "I might with justice say the same of you."

She turned to a tall, white-bearded man beside her.

"Papa, I must introduce you to Mr. Hatteras. You will remember I told you how kind Mr. Hatteras was when those larrikins were rude to me in the Domain."

"I am sincerely obliged to you, Mr. Hatteras," he said, holding out his hand and shaking mine heartily. "My daughter did tell me, and I called yesterday at your hotel to thank you personally, but you were unfortunately not at home. Are you visiting Europe?"

"Yes; I'm going home for a short visit to see the place where my father was born."

"Are you then, like myself, an Australian native? I mean, of course, as you know, colonial born?" asked Miss Wetherell with a little laugh. The idea of her calling herself an Australian native in any other sense! The very notion seemed preposterous.

"I was born at sea, a degree and a half south of Mauritius," I answered; "so I don't know what you would call me. I hope you have comfortable cabins?"

"Very. We have made two or three voyages in this boat before, and we always take the same places. And now, papa, we must really go and see where poor Miss Thompson is. We are beginning to feel the swell, and she'll be wanting to go below."

Good-bye for the present.”

I raised my cap and watched her walk away down the deck, balancing herself as if she had been accustomed to a heaving plank all her life. Then I turned to watch the fast receding shore, and to my own thoughts, which were none of the saddest, I can assure you. For it must be confessed here — and why should I deny it? — that I was in love from the soles of my deck shoes to the cap upon my head. But as to the chance, that I, a humble pearler, would stand with one of Sydney’s most beautiful daughters — why, that’s another matter, and one that, for the present, I was anxious to keep behind me.

Within the week we had left Adelaide behind us, and four days later Albany was also a thing of the past. By the time we had cleared the Lewin we had all settled down to our life aboard ship, the bad sailors were beginning to appear on deck again, and the medium voyagers to make various excuses for their absences from meals. One thing was evident, that Miss Wetherell was the belle of the ship. Everybody paid her attention, from the skipper down to the humblest deck hand. And this being so, I prudently kept out of the way, for I had no desire to be thought to presume on our previous acquaintance. Whether she noticed this I cannot tell, but at any rate her manner to me when we *did* speak was more cordial than I had any right or reason to expect it would be. Seeing this, there were not wanting people on board who scoffed and sneered at the idea of the Colonial Secretary’s daughter noticing so humble a person as myself, and when it became known what my exact social position was, I promise you these malicious whisperings did not cease.

One evening, two or three days after we had left Colombo behind us, I was standing at the rails on the promenade deck a little abaft the smoking-room entrance, when Miss Wetherell came up and took her place beside me. She looked very dainty and sweet in her evening dress, and I felt, if I had known her better, I should have liked to tell her so.

“Mr. Hatteras,” said she, when we had discussed the weather and the sunset, “I have been thinking lately that you desire to avoid me.”

“Heaven forbid! Miss Wetherell,” I hastened to reply. “What on earth put such a notion into your head?”

“All the same I believe it to be true. Now, why do you do it?”

“I have not admitted that I do do it. But, perhaps, if I do seem to deny myself the pleasure of being with you as much as some other people I could mention, it is only because I fail to see what possible enjoyment you can derive from my society.”

“That is a very pretty speech,” she answered, smiling, “but it does not tell me what I want to know.”

“And what is it that you want to know, my dear young lady?”

“I want to know why you are so much changed towards me. At first we got on splendidly — you used to tell me of your life in Torres Straits, of your trading ventures in the Southern Seas, and even of your hopes for the future. Now, however, all that is changed. It is, ‘Good-morning, Miss Wetherell,’ ‘Good-evening, Miss Wetherell,’ and that is all. I must own I don’t like such treatment.”

“I must crave your pardon — but —”

“No, we won’t have any ‘buts.’ If you want to be forgiven, you must come and talk to me as you used to do. You will like the rest of the people I’m sure when you get to know them. They are very kind to me.”

“And you think I shall like them for that reason?”

“No, no. How silly you are. But I do so want you to be friendly.”

After that there was nothing for it but for me to push myself into a circle where I had the best reasons for knowing that I was not wanted. However, it had its good side: I saw more of Miss Wetherell; so much more indeed that I began to notice that her father did not quite approve of it. But, whatever he may have thought, he said nothing to me on the subject.

A fortnight or so later we were at Aden, leaving that barren rock about four o’clock, and entering the Red Sea the same evening. The Suez Canal passed through, and Port Said behind us, we were in the Mediterranean, and for the first time in my life I stood in Europe.

At Naples the Wetherells were to say good-bye to the boat, and continue the rest of their journey home across the Continent. As the hour of separation approached, I must confess I began to dread it more and more. And somehow, I fancy, *she* was not quite as happy as she used to be. You will probably ask what grounds I had for believing that a girl like Miss Wetherell would take any interest in a man like myself; and it is a question I can no more answer than I can fly. And yet, when I came to think it all out, I was not without my hopes.

We were to reach port the following morning. The night was very still, the water almost unruffled. Somehow it came about that Miss Wetherell and I found ourselves together in the same sheltered spot where she had spoken to me on the occasion referred to before. The stars in the east were paling, preparatory to the rising of the moon. I glanced at my companion as she leant against the rails scanning the quiet sea, and noticed the sweet wistfulness of her expression. Then, suddenly, a great desire came over me to tell her of my love. Surely, even if she could not return it, there would be no harm in letting her know how I felt towards her. For this reason I drew a little closer to her.

“And so, Miss Wetherell,” I said, “to-morrow we are to say good-bye; never, perhaps, to meet again.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Hatteras,” she answered, “we won’t say that. Surely we shall see something of each other somewhere. The world is very tiny after all.”

“To those who desire to avoid each other, perhaps, but for those who wish to *find* it is still too large.”

“Well, then, we must hope for the best. Who knows but that we may run across each other in London. I think it is very probable.”

“And will that meeting be altogether distasteful to you?” I asked, quite expecting that she would answer with her usual frankness. But to my surprise she did not speak, only turned half away from me. Had I offended her?

“Miss Wetherell, pray forgive my rudeness,” I said hastily. “I ought to have known I had no right to ask you such a question.”

“And why shouldn’t you?” she replied, this time turning her sweet face towards me. “No, I will tell you frankly, I should very much like to see you again.”

With that all the blood in my body seemed to rush to my head. Could I be dreaming? Or had she really said she would like to see me again? I would try my luck now whatever came of it.

“You cannot think how pleasant our intercourse has been to me,” I said. “And now I have to go back to my lonely, miserable existence again.”

“But you should not say that; you have your work in life!”

“Yes, but what is that to me when I have no one to work for? Can you conceive anything more awful than my loneliness? Remember, as far as I know I am absolutely without kith and kin. There is not a single soul to care for me in the whole world — not one to whom my death would be a matter of the least concern.”

“Oh, don’t — don’t say that!” Her voice faltered so that I turned from the sea and contemplated her.

“It is true, Miss Wetherell, bitterly true.”

“It is not true. It cannot be true!”

“If only I could think it would be some little matter of concern to you I should go back to my work with a happier heart.”

Again she turned her face from me. My arm lay beside hers upon the bulwarks, and I could feel that she was trembling. Brutal though it may seem to say so, this gave me fresh courage. I said slowly, bending my face a little towards her:

“Would it affect you, Phyllis?”

One little hand fell from the bulwarks to her side, and I took possession of it. She did not appear to have heard my question, so I repeated it. Then her head went down upon the bulwarks, but not before I had caught the whispered “yes” that escaped her lips.

Before she could guess what was going to happen, I had taken her in my arms and smothered her face with kisses. Nor did she offer any resistance. I knew the whole truth now. She was mine, she loved me — me — me — me! The whole world seemed to re-echo the news, the very sea to ring with it, and just as I learned from her own dear lips the story of her love, the great moon rose as if to listen. Can you imagine my happiness, my delight? She was mine, this lovely girl, my very own! bound to me by all the bonds of love. Oh, happy hour! Oh, sweet delight! I pressed her to my heart again and again. She looked into my face and then away from me, her sweet eyes suffused with tears, then suddenly her expression changed. I turned to see what ailed her, and to my discomfiture discovered her father stalking along the silent deck towards us.

Whispering to her to leave us, she sped away, and I was left alone with her angry parent. That he *was* angry I judged from his face; nor was I wrong in my conjecture.

“Mr. Hatteras,” he said severely, “pray what does this mean? How is it that I find you in this undignified position with

my daughter?"

"Mr. Wetherell," I answered, "I can see that an explanation is due to you. Just before you came up I was courageous enough to tell your daughter that I loved her. She has been generous enough to inform me that she returns my affection. And now the best course for me to pursue is to ask your permission to make her my wife."

"You presume, sir, upon the service you rendered my daughter in Sydney. I did not think you would follow it up in this fashion."

"Your daughter is free to love whom she pleases, I take it," I said, my temper getting a little the better of my judgment. "She has been good enough to promise to marry me — if I can obtain your permission. Have you any objection to raise?"

"Only one, and that one is insuperable! Understand me, I forbid it once and for all! In every particular — without hope of change — I forbid it!"

"As you must see it is a matter which affects the happiness of two lives, I feel sure you will be good enough to tell me your reasons?"

"I must decline any discussion on the matter at all. You have my answer, I forbid it!"

"This is to be final, then? I am to understand that you are not to be brought to change your mind by any actions of mine?"

"No, sir, I am not! What I have said is irrevocable. The idea is not to be thought of for a moment. And while I am on this subject let me tell you that your conduct towards my daughter on board this ship has been very distasteful to me. I have the honour to wish you a very good-evening."

"Stay, Mr. Wetherell," I said, as he turned to go. "You have been kind enough to favour me with your views. Now I will give you mine. Your daughter loves me. I am an honest and an industrious man, and I love her with my whole heart and soul. I tell you now, and though you decline to treat me with proper fairness, I give you warning that I intend to marry her if she will still have me — with your consent or without it!"

"You are insolent, sir."

"I assure you I have no desire to be. I endeavour to remember that you are her father, though I must own you lack her sense of what is fair and right."

"I will not discuss the question any further with you. You know my absolute decision. Good-night!"

With anger and happiness struggling in my breast for the mastery, I paced that deck for hours. My heart swelled with joy at the knowledge that my darling loved me, but it sank like lead when I considered the difficulties which threatened us if her father persisted in his present determination. At last, just as eight bells was striking (twelve o'clock), I went below to my cabin. My fellow-passenger was fast asleep — a fact which I was grateful for when I discovered propped against my bottle-rack a tiny envelope with my name upon it. Tearing it open I read the following:—

"My own Dearest —

"My father has just informed me of his interview with you. I cannot understand it or ascribe a reason for it. But whatever happens, remember that I will be your wife, and the wife of no other.

"May God bless and keep you always.

"Your own,

Phyllis.

"P.S. — Before we leave the ship you must let me know your address in London."

With such a letter under my pillow, can it be doubted that my dreams were good? Little I guessed the accumulation of troubles to which this little unpleasantness with Mr. Wetherell was destined to be the prelude!



CHAPTER 2

My 1ST Experience in LONDON

Now that I come to think the matter out, I don't know that I could give you any definite idea of what my first impressions of London were. One thing at least is certain, I had never had experience of anything approaching such a city before, and, between ourselves, I can't say that I ever want to again. The constant rush and roar of traffic, the crowds of people jostling each other on the pavements, the happiness and the misery, the riches and the poverty, all mixed up together in one jumble, like good and bad fruit in a basket, fairly took my breath away; and when I went down, that first afternoon, and saw the Park in all its summer glory, my amazement may be better imagined than described.

I could have watched the carriages, horsemen, and promenaders for hours on end without any sense of weariness. And when a bystander, seeing that I was a stranger, took compassion upon my ignorance and condescended to point out to me the various celebrities present, my pleasure was complete. There certainly is no place like London for show and glitter, I'll grant you that; but all the same I'd no more think of taking up my permanent abode in it than I'd try to cross the Atlantic in a Chinese sampan.

Having before I left Sydney been recommended to a quiet hotel in a neighbourhood near the Strand, convenient both for sight-seeing and business, I had my luggage conveyed thither, and prepared to make myself comfortable for a time. Every day I waited eagerly for a letter from my sweetheart, the more impatiently because its non-arrival convinced me that they had not yet arrived in London. As it turned out, they had delayed their departure from Naples for two days, and had spent another three in Florence, two in Rome, and a day and a half in Paris.

One morning, however, my faithful watch over the letter rack, which was already becoming a standing joke in the hotel, was rewarded. An envelope bearing an English stamp and postmark, and addressed in a handwriting as familiar to me as my own, stared me in the face. To take it out and break the seal was the work of a moment. It was only a matter of a few lines, but it brought me news that raised me to the seventh heaven of delight.

Mr. and Miss Wetherell had arrived in London the previous afternoon, they were staying at the *Hôtel Métropole*, would leave town for the country at the end of the week, but in the meantime, if I wished to see her, my sweetheart would be in the entrance hall of the British Museum the following morning at eleven o'clock.

How I conducted myself in the interval between my receipt of the letter and the time of the appointment, I have not the least remembrance; I know, however, that half-past ten, on the following morning, found me pacing up and down the street before that venerable pile, scanning with eager eyes every conveyance that approached me. The minutes dragged by with intolerable slowness, but at length the time arrived.

A kindly church clock in the neighbourhood struck the hour, and others all round it immediately took up the tale. Before the last stroke had died away a hansom turned towards the gates from Bury Street, and in it, looking the picture of health and beauty, sat the girl who, I had good reason to know, was more than all the world to me. To attract her attention and signal to the driver to pull up was the work of a second, and a minute later I had helped her to alight, and we were strolling together across the square towards the building.

"Ah, Dick," she said, with a roguish smile, "you don't know what trouble I had to get away this morning. Papa had a dozen places he wished me to go to with him. But when I told him that I had some very important business of my own to attend to before I could go calling, he was kind enough to let me off."

"I'll be bound he thought you meant business with a dressmaker," I laughingly replied, determined to show her that I was not unversed in the ways of women.

"I'm afraid he did," she answered, blushing, "and I feel horribly guilty. But my heart told me I must see you at once, whatever happened."

Could any man desire a prettier speech than that? If so, I was not that man. We were inside the building by this time,

ascending the great staircase.

As we entered the room at the top of the stairs, I thought it a good opportunity to ask the question I had been longing to put to her.

"Phyllis, my sweetheart," I said, with a tremor in my voice, "it is a fortnight now since I spoke to you. You have had plenty of time to consider our position. Have you regretted giving me your love?"

We came to a standstill, and leant over a case together, but what it contained I'm sure I haven't the very vaguest idea.

She looked up into my face with a sweet smile.

"Not for one single instant, Dick! Having once given you my love, is it likely I should want it back again?"

"I don't know. Somehow I can't discover sufficient reason for your giving it to me at all."

"Well, be sure I'm not going to tell you. You might grow conceited. Isn't it sufficient that I *do* love you, and that I am not going to give you up, whatever happens?"

"More than sufficient," I answered solemnly. "But, Phyllis, don't you think I can induce your father to relent? Surely as a good parent he must be anxious to promote your happiness at any cost to himself?"

"I can't understand it at all. He has been so devoted to me all my life that his conduct now is quite inexplicable. Never once has he denied me anything I really set my heart upon, and he always promised me that I should be allowed to marry whomsoever I pleased, provided he was a good and honourable man, and one of whom he could in any way approve. And you are all that, Dick, or I shouldn't have loved you, I know."

"I don't think I'm any worse than the ordinary run of men, dearest, if I am no better. At any rate I love you with a true and honourable love. But don't you think he will come round in time?"

"I'm almost afraid not. He referred to it only yesterday, and seemed quite angry that I should have dared to entertain any thought of you after what he said to me on board ship. It was the first time in my life he ever spoke to me in such a tone, and I felt it keenly. No, Dick, there is something behind it all that I cannot understand. Some mystery that I would give anything to fathom. Papa has not been himself ever since we started for England. Indeed, his very reason for coming at all is an enigma to me. And now that he is here, he seems in continual dread of meeting somebody — but who that somebody is, and why my father, who has the name and reputation of being such a courageous, determined, honourable man, should be afraid, is a thing I cannot understand."

"It's all very mysterious and unfortunate. But surely something can be done? Don't you think if I were to see him again, and put the matter more plainly before him, something might be arranged?"

"It would be worse than useless at present, I fear. No, you must just leave it to me, and I'll do my best to talk him round. Ever since my mother died I have been as his right hand, and it will be strange if he does not listen to me and see reason in the end."

Seeing who it was that would plead with him I did not doubt it.

By this time we had wandered through many rooms and now found ourselves in the Egyptian Department, surrounded by embalmed dead folk and queer objects of all sorts and descriptions. There was something almost startling about our love-making in such a place, among these men and women, whose wooings had been conducted in a country so widely different to ours, and in an age that was dead and gone over two thousand years ere we were born. I spoke of this to Phyllis. She laughed and gave a little shiver.

"I wonder," she said, looking down on the swathed-up figure of a princess of the royal house of Egypt, lying stretched out in the case beside which we sat, "if this great lady, who lies so still and silent now, had any trouble with her love affair?"

"Perhaps she had more than one beau to her string, and not being allowed to have one took the other," I answered; "though from what we can see of her now she doesn't look as if she were ever capable of exercising much fascination, does she?"

As I spoke I looked from the case to the girl and compared the swaddled-up figure with the healthy, living, lovely creature by my side. But I hadn't much time for comparison. My sweetheart had taken her watch from her pocket and was glancing at the dial.

"A quarter to twelve!" she cried in alarm, "Oh, Dick, I must be going. I promised to meet papa at twelve, and I must not keep him waiting."

She rose and was about to pull on her gloves. But before she had time to do so I had taken a little case from my pocket and opened it. When she saw what it contained she could not help a little womanly cry of delight.

"Oh, Dick! you naughty, extravagant boy!"

"Why, dearest? Why naughty or extravagant to give the woman I love a little token of my affection?" As I spoke I slipped the ring over her pretty finger and raised the hand to my lips.

"Will you try," I said, "whenever you look at that ring, to remember that the man who gave it to you loves you with his whole heart and soul, and will count no trouble too great, or no exertion too hard, to make you happy?"

"I will remember," she said solemnly, and when I looked I saw that tears stood in her eyes. She brushed them hastily away, and after an interlude which it hardly becomes me to mention here, we went down the stairs again and out into the street, almost in silence.

Having called a cab, I placed her in it and nervously asked the question that had been sometime upon my mind:—"When shall I see you again?"

"I cannot tell," she answered. "Perhaps next week. But I'll let you know. In the meantime don't despair; all will come right yet. Good-bye."

"Good-bye and God bless you!"

Having seen the last of her I wandered slowly down the pavement towards Oxford Street, then turning to my left hand, made my way citywards. My mind was full of my interview with the sweet girl who had just left me, and I wandered on and on, wrapped in my own thoughts, until I found myself in a quarter of London into which I had never hitherto penetrated. The streets were narrow, and, as if to be in keeping with the general air of gloom, the shops were small and their wares of a peculiarly sordid nature.

A church clock somewhere in the neighbourhood struck "One," and as I was beginning to feel hungry, and knew myself to be a long way from my hotel, I cast about me for a lunching-place. But it was some time before I encountered the class of restaurant I wanted. When I did it was situated at the corner of two streets, carried a foreign name over the door, and, though considerably the worse for wear, presented a cleaner appearance than any other I had as yet experienced.

Pushing the door open I entered. An unmistakable Frenchman, whose appearance, however, betokened long residence in England, stood behind a narrow counter polishing an absinthe glass. He bowed politely and asked my business.

"Can I have lunch?" I asked.

"Oui, monsieur! Cer-tain-lee. If monsieur will walk upstairs I will take his order."

Waving his hand in the direction of a staircase in the corner of the shop he again bowed elaborately, while I, following the direction he indicated, proceeded to the room above. It was long and lofty, commanded an excellent view of both thoroughfares, and was furnished with a few inferior pictures, half a dozen small marble-top tables, and four times as many chairs.

When I entered three men were in occupation. Two were playing chess at a side table, while the third, who had evidently no connection with them, was watching the game from a distance, at the same time pretending to be absorbed in his paper. Seating myself at a table near the door, I examined the bill of fare, selected my lunch, and in order to amuse myself while it was preparing, fell to scrutinizing my companions.

Of the chess-players, one was a big, burly fellow, with enormous arms, protruding rheumy eyes, a florid complexion, and a voluminous red beard. His opponent was of a much smaller build, with pale features, a tiny moustache, and watery blue eyes. He wore a *pince-nez*, and from the length of his hair and a dab of crimson lake upon his shirt cuff, I argued him an artist.

Leaving the chess-players, my eyes lighted on the stranger on the other side. He was more interesting in every way. Indeed, I was surprised to see a man of his stamp in the house at all. He was tall and slim, but exquisitely formed, and plainly the possessor of enormous strength. His head, if only from a phrenological point of view, was a magnificent one, crowned with a wealth of jet-black hair. His eyes were dark as night, and glittered like those of a snake. His complexion was of a decidedly olive hue, though, as he sat in the shadow of the corner, it was difficult to tell this at first sight.

But what most fascinated me about this curious individual was the interest he was taking in the game the other men were playing. He kept his eyes fixed upon the board, looked anxiously from one to the other as a move trembled in the

balance, smiled sardonically when his desires were realized, and sighed almost aloud when a mistake was made.

Every moment I expected his anxiety or disappointment to find vent in words, but he always managed to control himself. When he became excited I noticed that his whole body quivered under its influence, and once when the smaller of the players made an injudicious move a look flew into his face that was full of such malignant intensity that I'll own I was influenced by it. What effect it would have had upon the innocent cause of it all, had he seen it, I should have been sorry to conjecture.

Just as my lunch made its appearance the game reached a conclusion, and the taller of the two players, having made a remark in German, rose to leave. It was evident that the smaller man had won, and in an excess of pride, to which I gathered his nature was not altogether a stranger, he looked round the room as if in defiance.

Doing so, his eyes met those of the man in the corner. I glanced from one to the other, but my gaze rested longest on the face of the smaller man. So fascinated did he seem to be by the other's stare that his eyes became set and stony. It was just as if he were being mesmerized. The person he looked at rose, approached him, sat down at the table and began to arrange the men on the board. Then he looked up again.

"May I have the pleasure of giving you a game?" he asked in excellent English, bowing slightly as he spoke, and moving a pawn with his long white fingers.

The little man found voice enough to murmur an appropriate reply, and they began their game, while I turned to my lunch. But, in spite of myself, I found my eyes continually reverting to what was happening at the other table. And, indeed, it was a curious sight I saw there. The tall man had thrown himself into the business of the game, heart and soul. He half sat, half crouched over the board, reminding me of a hawk hovering over a poultry yard.

His eyes were riveted first on the men before him and then on his opponent — his long fingers twitched and twined over each move, and seemed as if they would never release their hold. Not once did he speak, but his attitude was more expressive than any words.

The effect on the little man, his companion, was overwhelming. He was quite unable to do anything, but sat huddled up in his chair as if terrified by his demoniacal companion. The result even a child might have foreseen. The tall man won, and the little man, only too glad to have come out of the ordeal with a whole skin, seized his hat and, with a half-uttered apology, darted from the room.

For a moment or two his extraordinary opponent sat playing with the chessmen. Then he looked across at me and without hesitation said, accompanying his remark with a curious smile, for which I could not at all account:—"I think you will agree with me that the limitations of the fool are the birth gifts of the wise!"

Not knowing what reply to make to this singular assertion, I wisely held my tongue. This brought about a change in his demeanour; he rose from his seat, and came across to where I sat. Seating himself in a chair directly opposite me, he folded his hands in his lap, after the manner of a demure old spinster, and, having looked at me earnestly, said with an almost indescribable sweetness of tone:—

"I think you will allow, Mr. Hatteras, that half the world is born for the other half to prey upon!"

For a moment I was too much astonished to speak; how on earth had he become aware of my name? I stumbled out some sort of reply, which evidently did not impress him very much, for he began again:—

"Our friend who has just left us will most certainly be one of those preyed upon. I pity him because he will not have the smallest grain of pleasure in his life. You, Mr. Hatteras, on the other hand, will, unwittingly, be in the other camp. Circumstances will arrange that for you. Some have, of course, no desire to prey; but necessity forces it on them. Yourself, for instance. Some only prey when they are quite sure there will be no manner of risk. Our German friend who played the previous game is an example. Others, again, never lose an opportunity. Candidly speaking, to which class should you imagine I belong?"

He smiled as he put the question, and, his thin lips parting, I could just catch the glitter of the short teeth with which his mouth was furnished. For the third time since I had made his acquaintance I did not know which way to answer. However, I made a shot and said something.

"I really know nothing about you," I answered. "But from your kindness in giving our artist friend a game, and now in allowing me the benefit of your conversation, I should say you only prey upon your fellow-men when dire extremity drives you to it."

“And you would be wrong. I am of the last class I mentioned. There is only one sport of any interest to me in life, and that is the opportunity of making capital out of my fellow humans. You see, I am candid with you, Mr. Hatteras!”

“Pray excuse me. But you know my name! As I have never, to my knowledge, set eyes on you before, would you mind telling me how you became acquainted with it?”

“With every pleasure. But before I do so I think it only fair to tell you that you will not believe my explanation. And yet it *should* convince you. At any rate we’ll try. In your right-hand top waistcoat pocket you have three cards.” Here he leant his head on his hands and shut his eyes. “One is crinkled and torn, but it has written on it, in pencil, the name of Edward Braithwaite, Macquarrie Street, Sydney. I presume the name is Braithwaite, but the *t* and *e* are almost illegible. The second is rather a high-sounding one — the Hon. Sylvester Wetherell, Potts Point, Sydney, New South Wales; and the third is, I take it, your own, Richard Hatteras. Am I right?”

I put my fingers in my pocket, and drew out what it contained — a half-sovereign, a shilling, a small piece of pencil, and three cards. The first, a well-worn piece of pasteboard, bore, surely enough, the name of Edward Braithwaite, and was that of the solicitor with whom I transacted my business in Sydney; the second was given me by my sweetheart’s father the day before we left Australia; and the third was certainly my own.

Was this witchcraft or only some clever conjuring trick? I asked myself the question, but could give it no satisfactory answer. At any rate you may be sure it did not lessen my respect for my singular companion.

“Ah! I am right, then!” he cried exultingly. “Isn’t it strange how the love of being right remains with us, when we think we have safely combated every other self-conceit. Well, Mr. Hatteras, I am very pleased to have made your acquaintance. Somehow I think we are destined to meet again — where I cannot say. At any rate, let us hope that that meeting will be as pleasant and successful as this has been.”

But I hardly heard what he said. I was still puzzling my brains over his extraordinary conjuring trick — for trick I am convinced it was. He had risen and was slowly drawing on his gloves when I spoke.

“I have been thinking over those cards,” I said, “and I am considerably puzzled. How on earth did you know they were there?”

“If I told you, you would have no more faith in my powers. So with your permission I will assume the virtue of modesty. Call it a conjuring trick, if you like. Many curious things are hidden under that comprehensive term. But that is neither here nor there. Before I go would you like to see one more?”

“Very much, indeed, if it’s as good as the last!”

In the window stood a large glass dish, half full of water, and having a dark brown fly paper floating on the surface. He brought it across to the table at which I sat, and having drained the water into a jug near by, left the paper sticking to the bottom.

This done, he took a tiny leather case from his pocket and a small bottle out of that again. From this bottle he poured a few drops of some highly pungent liquid on to the paper, with the result that it grew black as ink and threw off a tiny vapour, which licked the edges of the bowl and curled upwards in a faint spiral column.

“There, Mr. Hatteras, this is a — well, a trick — I learned from an old woman in Benares. It is a better one than the last and will repay your interest. If you will look on that paper for a moment, and try to concentrate your attention, you will see something that will, I think, astonish you.”

Hardly believing that I should see anything at all I looked. But for some seconds without success. My scepticism, however, soon left me. At first I saw only the coarse grain of the paper and the thin vapour rising from it. Then the knowledge that I was gazing into a dish vanished. I forget my companion and the previous conjuring trick. I saw only a picture opening out before me — that of a handsomely furnished room, in which was a girl sitting in an easy chair crying as if her heart were breaking. The room I had never seen before, but the girl I should have known among a thousand. *She was Phyllis, my sweetheart!*

I looked and looked, and as I gazed at her, I heard her call my name. “Oh, Dick! Dick! come to me!” Instantly I sprang to my feet, meaning to cross the room to her. Next moment I became aware of a loud crash. The scene vanished, my senses came back to me; and to my astonishment I found myself standing alongside the overturned restaurant table. The glass dish lay on the floor, shattered into a thousand fragments. My friend, the conjuror, had disappeared.

Having righted the table again, I went downstairs and explained my misfortune. When I had paid my bill I took my

departure, more troubled in mind than I cared to confess. That it was only what he had called it, a conjuring trick, I felt I ought to be certain, but still it was clever and uncanny enough to render me very uncomfortable.

In vain I tried to drive the remembrance of the scene I had witnessed from my brain, but it would not be dispelled. At length, to satisfy myself, I resolved that if the memory of it remained with me so vividly in the morning I would take the bull by the horns and call at the *Métropole* to make inquiries.

I returned to my hotel in time for dinner, but still I could not rid myself of the feeling that some calamity was approaching. Having sent my meal away almost untouched, I called a hansom and drove to the nearest theatre, but the picture of Phyllis crying and calling for me in vain kept me company throughout the performance, and brought me home more miserable at the end than I had started. All night long I dreamed of it, seeing the same picture again and again, and hearing the same despairing cry, "Oh, Dick! Dick! come to me!"

In the morning there was only one thing to be done. Accordingly, after breakfast I set off to make sure that nothing was the matter. On the way I tried to reason with myself. I asked how it was that I, Dick Hatteras, a man who thought he knew the world so well, should have been so impressed with a bit of wizardry as to be willing to risk making a fool of myself before the two last people in the world I wanted to think me one. Once I almost determined to turn back, but while the intention held me the picture rose again before my mind's eye, and on I went more resolved to solve the mystery.

Arriving at the hotel, a gorgeously caparisoned porter, who stood on the steps, said in response to my inquiry:—

"They've left, sir. Started yesterday afternoon, quite suddenly, for Paris, on their way back to Australia!"



CHAPTER 3

I VISIT MY RELATIONS - The Home of my Ancestors

For the moment I could hardly believe my ears. Gone? Why had they gone? What could have induced them to leave England so suddenly? I questioned the hall porter on the subject, but he could tell me nothing save that they had departed for Paris the previous day, intending to proceed across the Continent in order to catch the first Australian boat at Naples.

Feeling that I should only look ridiculous if I stayed questioning the man any longer, I pressed a tip into his hand and went slowly back to my own hotel to try and think it all out. But though I devoted some hours to it, I could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. The one vital point remained and was not to be disputed — they were gone. But the mail that evening brought me enlightenment in the shape of a letter, written in London and posted in Dover. It ran as follows:—

“Monday Afternoon.

“My own Dearest.— Something terrible has happened to papa! I cannot tell you what, because I do not know myself. He went out this morning in the best of health and spirits, and returned half an hour ago trembling like a leaf and white as a sheet. He had only strength enough left to reach a chair in my sitting-room before he fainted dead away. When he came to himself again he said, ‘Tell your maid to pack at once. There is not a moment to lose. We start for Paris this evening to catch the next boat leaving Naples for Australia.’ I said, ‘But papa!’ ‘Not a word,’ he answered. ‘I have seen somebody this morning whose presence renders it impossible for us to remain an instant longer in England. Go and pack at once, unless you wish my death to lie at your door.’ After that I could, of course, say nothing. I have packed and now, in half an hour, we leave England again. If I could only see you to say good-bye; but that, too, is impossible. I cannot tell what it all means, but that it is very serious business that takes us away so suddenly I feel convinced. My father seems frightened to remain in London a minute longer than he can help. He even stands at the window as I write, earnestly scrutinizing everybody who enters the hotel. And now, my own —”

But what follows, the reiterations of her affection, her vows to be true to me, etc., etc., could have no possible interest for any one save lovers.

I sat like one stunned. All enjoyment seemed suddenly to have gone out of life for me. I could only sit twirling the paper in my hand and picturing the train flying remorselessly across France, bearing away from me the girl I loved better than all the world. I went down to the Park, but the scene there had no longer any interest in my eyes. I went later on to a theatre, but I found no enjoyment in the piece performed. London had suddenly become distasteful to me. I felt I must get out of it; but where could I go? Every place was alike in my present humour. Then one of the original motives of my journey rose before me, and I determined to act on the suggestion.

Next morning I accordingly set off for Hampshire to try, if possible, to find my father’s old home. What sort of a place it would turn out to be I had not the very remotest idea.

Leaving the train at Lyndhurst Road — for the village I was in search of was situated in the heart of the New Forest — I hired a ramshackle conveyance from the nearest innkeeper and started off for it. The man who drove me had lived in the neighbourhood, so he found early occasion to inform me, all his seventy odd years, and it struck him as a humorous circumstance that he had never in his life been even as far as Southampton, a matter of only ten minutes by rail.

We had travelled a matter of two miles when it struck me to ask my charioteer about the place to which we were proceeding. It was within the bounds of possibility, I thought, that he might once have known my father. I determined to try him. So waiting till we had passed a load of hay coming along the lane, I put the question to him.

To my surprise, he had no sooner heard the name than he became as excited as it was possible for him to be.

“Hatteras!” he cried. “Be ye a Hatteras? Well, well, now, dearie me, who’d ha’ thought it!”

“Do you know the name so well, then?”

“Ay! ay! I know the name well enough; who doesn’t in these parts? There was the old Squire and Lady Margaret when first I remember. Then Squire Jasper and his son, the captain, as was killed in the mutiny in foreign parts — and Master James —”

“James — that was my father’s name. James Dymoke Hatteras.”

“You Master James’ son — you don’t say! Well! well! Now to think of that too! Him that ran away from home after words with the Squire, and went to foreign parts. Who’d have thought it! Sir William will be right down glad to see ye, I’ll be bound.”

“Sir William, and who’s Sir William?”

“He’s the only one left now, sir. Lives up at the House. Ah, dear! ah, dear! There’s been a power o’ trouble in the family these years past.”

By this time the aspect of the country was changing. We had left the lane behind us, ascended a short hill, and were now descending it again through what looked to my eyes more like a stately private avenue than a public road. Beautiful elms reared themselves on either hand and intermingled their branches overhead; while before us, through a gap in the foliage, we could just distinguish the winding river, with the thatched roofs of the village, of which we had come in search, lining its banks, and the old grey tower of the church keeping watch and ward over all.

There was to my mind something indescribably peaceful and even sad about that view, a mute sympathy with the Past that I could hardly account for, seeing that I was Colonial born and bred. For the first time since my arrival in England the real beauty of the place came home upon me. I felt as if I could have looked for ever on that quiet and peaceful spot.

When we reached the bottom of the hill, and had turned the corner, a broad, well-made stone bridge confronted us. On the other side of this was an old-fashioned country inn, with its signboard dangling from the house front, and opposite it again a dilapidated cottage lolling beside two iron gates. The gates were eight feet or more in height, made of finely wrought iron, and supported by big stone posts, on the top of which two stone animals — griffins, I believe they are called — holding shields in their claws, looked down on passers-by in ferocious grandeur. From behind the gates an avenue wound and disappeared into the wood.

Without consulting me, my old charioteer drove into the inn yard, and, having thrown the reins to an ostler, descended from the vehicle. I followed his example, and then inquired the name of the place inside the gates. My guide, philosopher, and friend looked at me rather queerly for a second or two, and then recollecting that I was a stranger to the place, said:—

“That be the Hall I was telling ‘ee about. That’s where Sir William lives!”

“Then that’s where my father was born?”

He nodded his head, and as he did so I noticed that the ostler stopped his work of unharnessing the horse, and looked at me in rather a surprised fashion.

“Well, that being so,” I said, taking my stick from the trap, and preparing to stroll off, “I’m just going to investigate a bit. You bring yourself to an anchor in yonder, and don’t stir till I come for you again.”

He took himself into the inn without more ado, and I crossed the road towards the gates. They were locked, but the little entrance by the tumble-down cottage stood open, and passing through this I started up the drive. It was a perfect afternoon; the sunshine straggled in through the leafy canopy overhead and danced upon my path. To the right were the thick fastnesses of the preserves; while on my left, across the meadows I could discern the sparkle of water on a weir. I must have proceeded for nearly a mile through the wood before I caught sight of the house. Then, what a strange experience was mine.

Leaving the shelter of the trees, I opened on to as beautiful a park as the mind of man could imagine. A herd of deer were grazing quietly just before me, a woodman was eating his dinner in the shadow of an oak; but it was not upon deer or woodman that I looked, but at the house that stared at me across the undulating sea of grass. It was a noble building, of grey stone, in shape almost square, with many curious buttresses and angles. The drive ran up to it with a grand sweep, and upon the green that fronted it some big trees reared their stately heads. In my time I’d heard a lot of talk about the stately homes of England, but this was the first time I had ever set eyes on one. And to think that this was my father’s birthplace, the house where my ancestors had lived for centuries! I could only stand and stare at it in sheer amazement.

You see, my father had always been a very silent man, and though he used sometimes to tell us yarns about scrapes

he'd got into as a boy, and how his father was a very stern man, and had sent him to a public school, because his tutor found him unmanageable, we never thought that he'd been anything very much.

To tell the truth, I felt a bit doubtful as to what I'd better do. Somehow I was rather nervous about going up to the house and introducing myself as a member of the family without any credentials to back my assertion up; and yet, on the other hand, I did not want to go away and have it always rankling in my mind that I'd seen the old place and been afraid to go inside. My mind once made up, however, off I went, crossed the park, and made towards the front door. On nearer approach, I discovered that everything showed the same neglect I had noticed at the lodge. The drive was overgrown with weeds; no carriage seemed to have passed along it for ages. Shutters enclosed many of the windows, and where they did not, not one but several of the panes were broken. Entering the great stone porch, in which it would have been possible to seat a score of people, I pulled the antique door-bell, and waited, while the peal re-echoed down the corridors, for the curtain to go up on the next scene.

Presently I heard footsteps approaching. A key turned in the lock, and the great door swung open. An old man, whose years could hardly have totalled less than seventy, stood before me, dressed in a suit of solemn black, almost green with age. He inquired my business in a wheezy whisper. I asked if Sir William Hatteras were at home. Informing me that he would find out, he left me to ruminate on the queerness of my position. In five minutes or so he returned, and signed to me to follow.

The hall was in keeping with the outside of the building, lofty and imposing. The floor was of oak, almost black with age, the walls were beautifully wainscoted and carved, and here and there tall armoured figures looked down upon me in disdainful silence. But the crowning glory of all was the magnificent staircase that ran up from the centre. It was wide enough and strong enough to have taken a coach and four, the pillars that supported it were exquisitely carved, as were the banisters and rails. Half-way up was a sort of landing, from which again the stairs branched off to right and left.

Above this landing-place, and throwing a stream of coloured light down into the hall, was a magnificent stained-glass window, and on a lozenge in the centre of it the arms that had so much puzzled me on the gateway. A nobler hall no one could wish to possess, but brooding over it was the same air of poverty and neglect I had noticed all about the place. By the time I had taken in these things, my guide had reached a door at the farther end. He bade me enter, and I did so, to find a tall, elderly man of stern aspect awaiting my coming.

He, like his servant, was dressed entirely in black, with the exception of a white tie, which gave his figure a semi-clerical appearance. His face was long and somewhat pinched, his chin and upper lip were shaven, and his snow-white, close-cropped whiskers ran in two straight lines from his jaw up to a level with his piercing, hawk-like eyes. He would probably have been about seventy-five years of age, but he did not carry it well. In a low, monotonous voice he bade me welcome, and pointed to a chair, himself remaining standing.

"My servant tells me you say your name is Hatteras?" he began.

"That is so," I replied. "My father was James Dymoke Hatteras."

He looked at me very sternly for almost a minute, not for a second betraying the slightest sign of surprise. Then putting his hands together, finger tip to finger tip, as I discovered later was his invariable habit while flunking, he said solemnly:—

"James was my younger brother. He misconducted himself gravely in England and was sent abroad. After a brief career of spendthrift extravagance in Australia, we never heard of him again. You may be his son, but then, on the other hand, of course, you may not. I have no means of judging."

"I give you my word," I answered, a little nettled by his speech and the insinuation contained in it; "but if you want further proof, I've got a Latin book in my portmanteau with my father's name upon the fly-leaf, and an inscription in his own writing setting forth that it was given by him to me."

"A Catullus?"

"Exactly! a Catullus."

"Then I'll have to trouble you to return it to me at your earliest convenience. The book is my property: I paid eighteenpence for it on the 3rd of July, 1833, in the shop of John Burns, Fleet Street, London. My brother took it from me a week later, and I have not been able to afford myself another copy since."

"You admit then that the book is evidence of my father's identity?"

"I admit nothing. What do you want with me? What do you come here for? You must see for yourself that I am too poor to be of any service to you, and I have long since lost any public interest I may once have possessed."

"I want neither one nor the other. I am home from Australia on a trip, and I have a sufficient competence to render me independent of any one."

"Ah! That puts a different complexion on the matter. You say you hail from Australia? And what may you have been doing there?"

"Gold-mining — pearling — trading!"

He came a step closer, and as he did so I noticed that his face had assumed a look of indescribable cunning, that was evidently intended to be of an ingratiating nature. He spoke in little jerks, pressing his fingers together between each sentence.

"Gold-mining! Ah! And pearling! Well, well! And you have been fortunate in your ventures?"

"Very!" I replied, having by this time determined on my line of action. "I daresay my cheque for ten thousand pounds would not be dishonoured."

"Ten thousand pounds! Ten thousand pounds! Dear me, dear me!"

He shuffled up and down the dingy room, all the time looking at me out of the corners of his eyes, as if to make sure that I was telling him the truth.

"Come, come, uncle," I said, resolving to bring him to his bearings without further waste of time. "This is not a very genial welcome!"

"Well, well, you mustn't expect too much, my boy! You see for yourself the position I'm in. The old place is shut up, going to rack and ruin. Poverty is staring me in the face; I am cheated by everybody. Robbed right and left, not knowing which way to turn. But I'll not be put upon. They may call me what they please, but they can't get blood out of a stone. Can they! Answer me that, now!"

This speech showed me everything as plain as a pikestaff. I mean, of course, the reason of the deserted and neglected house, and his extraordinary reception of myself. I rose to my feet.

"Well, uncle — for my uncle you certainly are, whatever you may say to the contrary — I must be going. I'm sorry to find you like this, and from what you tell me I couldn't think of worrying you with my society! I want to see the old church and have a talk with the parson, and then I shall go off never to trouble you again."

He immediately became almost fulsome in his effort to detain me. "No, no! You mustn't go like that. It's not hospitable. Besides, you mustn't talk with parson. He's a bad lot, is parson — a hard man with a cruel tongue. Says terrible things about me, does parson. But I'll be even with him yet. Don't speak to him, laddie, for the honour of the family. Now ye'll stay and take lunch with me? — potluck, of course — I'm too poor to give ye much of a meal; and in the meantime I'll show ye the house and estate."

This was just what I wanted, though I did not look forward to the prospect of lunch in his company.

With trembling hands he took down an old-fashioned hat from a peg and turned towards the door. When we had passed through it he carefully locked it and dropped the key into his breeches' pocket. Then he led the way upstairs by the beautiful oak staircase I had so much admired on entering the house.

When we reached the first landing, which was of noble proportions and must have contained upon its walls nearly a hundred family portraits all coated with the dust of years, he approached a door and threw it open. A feeble light straggled in through the closed shutters, and revealed an almost empty room. In the centre stood a large canopied bed, of antique design. The walls were wainscoted, and the massive chimney-piece was carved with heraldic designs. I inquired what room this might be.

"This is where all our family were born," he answered. "'Twas here your father first saw the light of day."

I looked at it with a new interest. It seemed hard to believe that this was the birthplace of my own father, the man whom I remembered so well in a place and life so widely different. My companion noticed the look upon my face, and, I suppose, felt constrained to say something. "Ah! James!" he said sorrowfully, "ye were always a giddy, roving lad. I remember ye well." (He passed his hand across his eyes, to brush away a tear, I thought, but his next speech disabused me of any such notion.) "I remember that but a day or two before ye went ye blooded my nose in the orchard, and the very

morning ye decamped ye borrowed half a crown of me, and never paid it back.”

A sudden something prompted me to put my hand in my pocket. I took out half a crown, and handed it to him without a word. He took it, looked at it longingly, put it in his pocket, took it out again, ruminated a moment, and then reluctantly handed it back to me.

“Nay, nay! my laddie, keep your money, keep your money. Ye can send me the Catullus.” Then to himself, unconscious that he was speaking his thoughts aloud: “It was a good edition, and I have no doubt would bring five shillings any day.”

From one room we passed into another, and yet another. They were all alike — shut up, dust-ridden, and forsaken. And yet with it all what a noble place it was — one which any man might be proud to call his own. And to think that it was all going to rack and ruin because of the miserly nature of its owner. In the course of our ramble I discovered that he kept but two servants, the old man who had admitted me to his presence, and his wife, who, as that peculiar phrase has it, cooked and did for him. I discovered later that he had not paid either of them wages for some years past, and that they only stayed on with him because they were too poor and proud to seek shelter elsewhere.

When we had inspected the house we left it by a side door, and crossed a courtyard to the stables. There the desolation was, perhaps, even more marked than in the house. The great clock on the tower above the main building had stopped at a quarter to ten on some long-forgotten day, and a spider now ran his web from hand to hand. At our feet, between the stones, grass grew luxuriantly, thick moss covered the coping of the well, the doors were almost off their hinges, and rats scuttled through the empty loose boxes at our approach. So large was the place, that thirty horses might have found a lodging comfortably, and as far as I could gather, there was room for half as many vehicles in the coach-houses that stood on either side. The intense quiet was only broken by the cawing of the rooks in the giant elms overhead, the squeaking of the rats, and the low grumbling of my uncle’s voice as he pointed out the ruin that was creeping over everything.

Before we had finished our inspection it was lunch time, and we returned to the house. The meal was served in the same room in which I had made my relative’s acquaintance an hour before. It consisted, I discovered, of two meagre mutton chops and some homemade bread and cheese, plain and substantial fare enough in its way, but hardly the sort one would expect from the owner of such a house. For a beverage, water was placed before us, but I could see that my host was deliberating as to whether he should stretch his generosity a point or two further.

Presently he rose, and with a muttered apology left the room, to return five minutes later carrying a small bottle carefully in his hand. This, with much deliberation and sighing, he opened. It proved to be claret, and he poured out a glassful for me. As I was not prepared for so much liberality, I thought something must be behind it, and in this I was not mistaken.

“Nephew,” said he after a while, “was it ten thousand pounds you mentioned as your fortune?”

I nodded. He looked at me slyly and cleared his throat to gain time for reflection. Then seeing that I had emptied my glass, he refilled it with another scarce concealed sigh, and sat back in his chair.

“And I understand you to say you are quite alone in the world, my boy?”

“Quite! Until I met you this morning I was unaware that I had a single relative on earth. Have I any more connections?”

“Not a soul — only Gwendoline.”

“Gwendoline! and who may Gwendoline be?”

“My daughter — your cousin. My only child! Would you like to see her?”

“I had no idea you had a daughter. Of course I should like to see her!”

He left the table and rang the bell. The ancient man-servant answered the summons.

“Tell you wife to bring Miss Gwendoline to us.”

“Miss Gwendoline here, sir? You do not mean it sure-lie, sir?”

“Numbskull! numbskull! numbskull!” cried the old fellow in an ecstasy of fury that seemed to spring up as suddenly as a squall does between the islands, “bring her or I’ll be the death of you.”

Without further remonstrance the old man left the room, and I demanded an explanation.

“Good servant, but an impudent rascal, sir!” he said. “Of course you must see my daughter, my beautiful daughter, Gwendoline. He’s afraid you’ll frighten her, I suppose! Ha! ha! Frighten my bashful, pretty one. Ha! ha!”

Anything so supremely devilish as the dried-up mirth of this old fellow it would be difficult to imagine. His very laugh seemed as if it had to crack in his throat before it could pass his lips. What would his daughter be like, living in such a house, with such companions? While I was wondering, I heard footsteps in the corridor, and then an old woman entered and curtsied respectfully. My host rose and went over to the fireplace, where he stood with his hands behind his back and the same devilish grin upon his face.

“Well, where is my daughter?”

“Sir, do you really mean it?”

“Of course I mean it. Where is she?”

In answer the old lady went to the door and called to some one in the hall.

“Come in, dearie. It’s all right. Come in, do’ee now, that’s a little dear.”

But the girl made no sign of entering, and at last the old woman had to go out and draw her in. And then — but I hardly know how to write it. How shall I give you a proper description of the —*thing* that entered.

She — if *she* it could be called — was about three feet high, dressed in a shapeless print costume. Her hair stood and hung in a tangled mass upon her head, her eyes were too large for her face, and to complete the horrible effect, a great patch of beard grew on one cheek, and descended almost to a level with her chin. Her features were all awry, and now and again she uttered little moans that were more like those of a wild beast than of a human being. In spite of the old woman’s endeavours to make her do so, she would not venture from her side, but stood slobbering and moaning in the half dark of the doorway.

It was a ghastly sight, one that nearly turned me sick with loathing. But the worst part of it all was the inhuman merriment of her father.

“There, there!” he cried; “had ever man such a lovely daughter? Isn’t she a beauty? Isn’t she fit to be a prince’s bride? Isn’t she fit to be the heiress of all this place? Won’t the young dukes be asking her hand in marriage? Oh, you beauty! You — but there, take her away — take her away, I say, before I do her mischief.”

The words had no sooner left his mouth than the old woman seized her charge and bundled her out of the room, moaning as before. I can tell you there was at least one person in that apartment who was heartily glad to be rid of her.

When the door had closed upon them my host came back to his seat, and with another sigh refilled my glass. I wondered what was coming next. It was not long, however, before I found out.

“Now you know everything,” he said. “You have seen my home, you have seen my poverty, and you have seen my daughter. What do you think of it all?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Well, then, I’ll tell you. That child wants doctors; that child wants proper attendance. She can get neither here. I am too poor to help her in any way. You’re rich by your own telling. I have to-day taken you into the bosom of my family, recognized you without doubting your assertions. Will you help me? Will you give me one thousand pounds towards settling that child in life? With that amount it could be managed.”

“Will I what?” I cried in utter amazement — dumbfounded by his impudence.

“Will you settle one thousand pounds upon her, to keep her out of her grave?”

“Not one penny!” I cried: “and, what’s more, you miserable, miserly old wretch, I’ll give you a bit of my mind.”

And thereupon I did! Such a talking to as I suppose the old fellow had never had in his life before, and one he’d not be likely to forget in a hurry. He sat all the time, white with fury, his eyes blazing, and his fingers quivering with impotent rage. When I had done he ordered me out of his house. I took him at his word, seized my hat, and strode across the hall through the front door, and out into the open air.

But I was not to leave the home of my ancestors without a parting shot. As I closed the front door behind me I heard a window go up, and on looking round there was the old fellow shaking his fist at me.

“Leave my house — leave my park!” he cried in a shrill falsetto, “or I’ll send for the constable to turn you off. Bah! You came to steal. You’re no nephew of mine; I disown you! You’re a common cheat — a swindler — an impostor! Go!”

I took him at his word, and went. Leaving the park, I walked straight across to the rectory, and inquired if I might see the clergyman. To him I told my tale, and, among other things, asked if anything could be done for the child — my cousin.

He only shook his head.

“I fear it is hopeless, Mr. Hatteras,” the clergyman said. “The old gentleman is a terrible character, and as he owns half the village, and every acre of the land hereabouts, we all live in fear and trembling of him. We have no shadow of a claim upon the child, and unless we can prove that he actually ill-treats it, I’m sorry to say I think there is nothing to be done.”

So ended my first meeting with my father’s family.

From the rectory I returned to my inn. What should I do now? London was worse than a desert to me now that my sweetheart was gone from it, and every other place seemed as bad. Then an advertisement on the wall of the bar parlour caught my eye:

“For Sale or Hire,
THE YACHT, *ENCHANTRESS*.
Ten Tons.
Apply, Screw & Matchem,
Bournemouth.”

It was just the very thing. I was pining for a breath of sea air again. It was perfect weather for a cruise. I would go to Bournemouth, inspect the yacht at once, and, if she suited me, take her for a month or so. My mind once made up, I hunted up my Jehu and set off for the train, never dreaming that by so doing I was taking the second step in that important chain of events that was to affect all the future of my life.



CHAPTER 4

I SAVE AN IMPORTANT LIFE

I travelled to Bournemouth by a fast train, and immediately on arrival made my way to the office of Messrs. Screw & Matchem, with a view to instituting inquiries regarding the yacht they had advertised for hire. It was with the senior partner I transacted my business; a shrewd but pleasant gentleman.

Upon my making known my business to him, he brought me a photograph of the craft in question, and certainly a nice handy boat she looked. She had been built, he went on to inform me, for a young nobleman, who had made two very considerable excursions in her before he had been compelled to fly the country, and was only three years old. I learned also that she was lying in Poole harbour, but he was good enough to say that if I wished to see her she should be brought round to Bournemouth the following morning, when I could inspect her at my leisure. As this arrangement was one that exactly suited me, I closed with it there and then, and thanking Mr. Matchem for his courtesy, betook myself to my hotel. Having dined, I spent the evening upon the pier — the first of its kind I had ever seen — listened to the band and diverted myself with thoughts of her to whom I had plighted my troth, and whose unexpected departure from England had been such a sudden and bitter disappointment to me.

Next morning, faithful to promise, the *Enchantress* sailed into the bay and came to an anchor within a biscuit throw of the pier. Chartering a dinghy, I pulled myself off to her, and stepped aboard. An old man and a boy were engaged washing down, and to them I introduced myself and business. Then for half an hour I devoted myself to overhauling her thoroughly. She was a nice enough little craft, well set up, and from her run looked as if she might possess a fair turn of speed; the gear was in excellent order, and this was accounted for when the old man told me she had been repaired and thoroughly overhauled that selfsame year.

Having satisfied myself on a few other minor points, I pulled ashore and again went up through the gardens to the agents' office. Mr. Matchem was delighted to hear that I liked the yacht well enough to think of hiring her at their own price (a rather excessive one, I must admit), and, I don't doubt, would have supplied me with a villa in Bournemouth, and a yachting box in the Isle of Wight, also on their own terms, had I felt inclined to furnish them with the necessary order. But fortunately I was able to withstand their temptations, and having given them my cheque for the requisite amount, went off to make arrangements, and to engage a crew.

Before nightfall I had secured the services of a handy lad in place of the old man who had brought the boat round from Poole, and was in a position to put to sea. Accordingly next morning I weighed anchor for a trip round the Isle of Wight. Before we had brought the Needles abeam I had convinced myself that the boat was an excellent sailer, and when the first day's cruise was over I had no reason to repent having hired her.

Not having anything to hurry me, and only a small boy and my own thoughts to keep me company, I took my time; remained two days in the Solent, sailed round the island, put in a day at Ventnor, and so back to Bournemouth. Then, after a day ashore, I picked up a nice breeze and ran down to Torquay to spend another week, sailing slowly back along the coast, touching at various ports, and returning eventually to the place I had first hailed from.

In relating these trifling incidents it is not my wish to bore my readers, but to work up gradually to that strange meeting to which they were the prelude. Now that I can look back in cold blood upon the circumstances that brought it about, and reflect how narrowly I escaped missing the one event which was destined to change my whole life, I can hardly realize that I attached such small importance to it at the time. Somehow I have always been a firm believer in Fate, and indeed it would be strange, all things considered, if I were not. For when a man has passed through so many extraordinary adventures as I have, and not only come out of them unharmed, but happier and a great deal more fortunate than he has really any right to be, he may claim the privilege, I think, of saying he knows something about his subject.

And, mind you, I date it all back to that visit to the old home, and to my uncle's strange reception of me, for had I not gone down into the country I should never have quarrelled with him, and if I had not quarrelled with him I should not have

gone back to the inn in such a dudgeon, and in that case I should probably have left the place without a visit to the bar, never have seen the advertisement, visited Bournemouth, hired the yacht or — but there, I must stop. You must work out the rest for yourself when you have heard my story.

The morning after my third return to Bournemouth I was up by daybreak, and had my breakfast, and was ready to set off on a cruise across the bay, before the sun was a hand's breadth above the horizon. It was as perfect a morning as any man could wish to see. A faint breeze just blurred the surface of the water, tiny waves danced in the sunshine, and my barkie nodded to them as if she were anxious to be off. The town ashore lay very quiet and peaceful, and so still was the air that the cries of a few white gulls could be heard quite distinctly, though they were half a mile or more away. Having hove anchor, we tacked slowly across the bay, passed the pier-head, and steered for Old Harry Rock and Swanage Bay. My crew was for'ard, and I had possession of the tiller.

As we went about between Canford Cliffs and Alum Chine, something moving in the water ahead of me attracted my attention. We were too far off to make out exactly what it might be, and it was not until five minutes later, when we were close abreast of it, that I discovered it to be a bather. The foolish fellow had ventured farther out than was prudent, had struck a strong current, and was now being washed swiftly out to sea. But for the splashing he made to show his whereabouts, I should in all probability not have seen him, and in that case his fate would have been sealed. As it was, when we came up with him he was quite exhausted.

Heaving my craft to, I leapt into the dinghy, and pulled towards him, but before I could reach the spot he had sunk. At first I thought he was gone for good and all, but in a few seconds he rose again. Then, grabbing him by the hair, I passed an arm under each of his, and dragged him unconscious into the boat. In less than three minutes we were alongside the yacht again, and with my crew's assistance I got him aboard. Fortunately a day or two before I had had the forethought to purchase some brandy for use in case of need, and my Thursday Island experiences having taught me exactly what was best to be done under such circumstances, it was not long before I had brought him back to consciousness.

In appearance he was a handsome young fellow, well set up, and possibly nineteen or twenty years of age. When I had given him a stiff nobbler of brandy to stop the chattering of his teeth, I asked him how he came to be so far from shore.

"I am considered a very good swimmer," he replied, "and often come out as far as this, but to-day I think I must have got into a strong outward current, and certainly but for your providential assistance I should never have reached home alive."

"You have had a very narrow escape," I answered, "but thank goodness you're none the worse for it. Now, what's the best thing to be done? Turn back, I suppose, and set you ashore."

"But what a lot of trouble I'm putting you to."

"Nonsense! I've nothing to do, and I count myself very fortunate in having been able to render you this small assistance. The breeze is freshening, and it won't take us any time to get back. Where do you live?"

"To the left there! That house standing back upon the cliff. I don't know how to express my gratitude."

"Just keep that till I ask you for it; and now, as we've got a twenty minutes' sail before us, the best thing for you to do would be to slip into a spare suit of my things. They'll keep you warm, and you can return them to my hotel when you get ashore."

I sang out to the boy to come aft and take the tiller, while I escorted my guest below into the little box of a cabin, and gave him a rig out. Considering I am six feet two, and he was only five feet eight, the things were a trifle large for him; but when he was dressed I couldn't help thinking what a handsome, well-built, aristocratic-looking young fellow he was. The work of fitting him out accomplished, we returned to the deck. The breeze was freshening, and the little hooker was ploughing her way through it, nose down, as if she knew that under the circumstances her best was expected of her.

"Are you a stranger in Bournemouth?" my companion asked, as I took the tiller again.

"Almost," I answered. "I've only been in England three weeks. I'm home from Australia."

"Australia! Really! Oh, I should so much like to go out there."

His voice was very soft and low, more like a girl's than a boy's, and I noticed that he had none of the mannerisms of a man — at least, not of one who has seen much of the world.

"Yes, Australia's as good a place as any other for the man who goes out there to work," I said. "But somehow you don't

look to me like a chap that is used to what is called roughing it. Pardon my bluntness.”

“Well, you see, I’ve never had much chance. My father is considered by many a very peculiar man. He has strange ideas about me, and so you see I’ve never been allowed to mix with other people. But I’m stronger than you’d think, and I shall be twenty in October next.”

“If you don’t mind telling me, what is your name?”

“I suppose there can be no harm in letting you know it. I was told if ever I met any one and they asked me, not to tell them. But since you saved my life it would be ungrateful not to let you know. I am the Marquis of Beckenham.”

“Is that so? Then your father is the Duke of Glenbarth?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“Never set eyes on him in my life, but I heard him spoken of the other day.”

I did not add that it was Mr. Matchem who, during my conversation with him, had referred to his Grace, nor did I think it well to say that he had designated him the “Mad Duke.” And so the boy I had saved from drowning was the young Marquis of Beckenham. Well, I was moving in good society with a vengeance. This boy was the first nobleman I had ever clapped eyes on, though I knew the Count de Panuroff well enough in Thursday Island. But then foreign Counts, and shady ones at that, ought not to reckon, perhaps.

“But you don’t mean to tell me,” I said at length, “that you’ve got no friends? Don’t you ever see any one at all?”

“No, I am not allowed to. My father thinks it better not. And as he does not wish it, of course I have nothing left but to obey. I must own, however, I should like to see the world — to go along voyage to Australia, for instance.”

“But how do you put in your time? You must have a very dull life of it.”

“Oh, no! You see, I have never known anything else, and then I have always the future to look forward to. As it is now, I bathe every morning, I have my yacht, I ride about the park, I have my studies, and I have a tutor who tells me wonderful stories of the world.”

“Oh, your tutor has been about, has he?”

“Dear me, yes! He was a missionary in the South Sea Islands, and has seen some very stirring adventures.”

“A missionary in the South Seas, eh? Perhaps I know him.”

“Were you ever in those seas?”

“Why, I’ve spent almost all my life there.”

“Were you a missionary?”

“You bet not. The missionaries and my friends don’t cotton to one another.”

“But they are such good men!”

“That may be. Still, as I say, we don’t somehow cotton. I’d like to set my eyes upon your tutor.”

“Well, you will. I think I see him on the beach now. I expect he has been wondering what has become of me. I’ve never been out so long before.”

“Well, you’re close home now, and as safe as eggs in a basket.”

Another minute brought us into as shallow water as I cared to go. Accordingly, heaving to, I brought the dinghy alongside, and we got into her. Then casting off, I pulled my lord ashore. A small, clean-shaven, parsonish-looking man, with the regulation white choker, stood by the water waiting for us. As I beached the boat he came forward and said:

“My lord, we have been very anxious about you. We feared you had met with an accident.”

“I have been very nearly drowned, Mr. Baxter. Had it not been for this gentleman’s prompt assistance I should never have reached home again.”

“You should really be more careful, my lord. I have warned you before. Your father has been nearly beside himself with anxiety about you!”

“Eh?” said I to myself. “Somehow this does not sound quite right. Anyhow, Mr. Baxter, I’ve seen your figure-head somewhere before — but you were not a missionary then, I’ll take my affidavit.”

Turning to me, my young lord held out his hand.

“You have never told me your name,” he said almost reproachfully.

“Dick Hatteras,” I answered, “and very much at your service.”

“Mr. Hatteras, I shall never forget what you have done for me. That I am most grateful to you I hope you will believe. I know that I owe you my life.”

Here the tutor’s voice chipped in again, as I thought, rather impatiently. “Come, come, my lord. This delay will not do. Your father will be growing still more nervous about you. We must be getting home!”

Then they went off up the cliff path together, and I returned to my boat.

“Mr. Baxter,” I said to myself again as I pulled off to the yacht, “I want to know where I’ve seen your face before. I’ve taken a sudden dislike to you. I don’t trust you; and if your employer’s the man they say he is, well, he won’t either.”

Then, having brought the dinghy alongside, I made the painter fast, clambered aboard, and we stood out of the bay once more.



CHAPTER 5

MYSTERY

The following morning I was sitting in my room at the hotel idly scanning the *Standard*, and wondering in what way I should employ myself until the time arrived for me to board the yacht, when I heard a carriage roll up to the door. On looking out I discovered a gorgeous landau, drawn by a pair of fine thoroughbreds, and resplendent with much gilded and crested harness, standing before the steps. A footman had already opened the door, and I was at the window just in time to see a tall, soldierly man alight from it. To my astonishment, two minutes later a waiter entered my room and announced "His Grace the Duke of Glenbarth." It was the owner of the carriage and the father of my young friend, if by such a title I might designate the Marquis of Beckenham.

"Mr. Hatteras, I presume?" said he.

"Yes, that is my name. I am honoured by your visit. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you."

He paused for a moment, and then continued:

"Mr. Hatteras, I have to offer you an apology. I should have called upon you yesterday to express the gratitude I feel to you for having saved the life of my son, but I was unavoidably prevented."

"I beg you will not mention it," I said. "His lordship thanked me sufficiently himself. And after all, when you look at it, it was not very much to do. I would, however, venture one little suggestion. Is it wise to let him swim so far unaccompanied by a boat? The same thing might happen to him on another occasion, and no one be near enough to render him any assistance."

"He will not attempt so much again. He has learned a lesson from this experience. And now, Mr. Hatteras, I trust you will forgive what I am about to say. My son has told me that you have just arrived in England from Australia. Is there any way I can be of service to you? If there is, and you will acquaint me with it, you will be conferring a great favour upon me."

"I thank your Grace," I replied — I hope with some little touch of dignity — "it is very kind of you, but I could not think of such a thing. But, stay, there is one service, perhaps you *could* do me."

"I am delighted to hear it, sir. And what may it be?"

"Your son's tutor, Mr. Baxter! His face is strangely familiar to me. I have seen him somewhere before, but I cannot recall where. Could you tell me anything of his history?"

"Very little, I fear, save that he seems a worthy and painstaking man, an excellent scholar, and very capable in his management of young men. I received excellent references with him, but of his past history I know very little. I believe, however, that he was a missionary in the South Seas for some time, and that he was afterwards for many years in India. I'm sorry I cannot tell you more about him since you are interested in him."

"I've met him somewhere, I'm certain. His face haunts me. But to return to your son — I hope he is none the worse for his adventure?"

"Not at all, thank you. Owing to the system I have adopted in his education, the lad is seldom ailing."

"Pardon my introducing the subject. But do you think it is quite wise to keep a youth so ignorant of the world? I am perhaps rather presumptuous, but I cannot help feeling that such a fine young fellow would be all the better for a few companions."

"You hit me on rather a tender spot, Mr. Hatteras. But, as you have been frank with me, I will be frank with you. I am one of those strange beings who govern their lives by theories. I was brought up by my father, I must tell you, in a fashion totally different from that I am employing with my son. I feel now that I was allowed a dangerous amount of license. And what was the result? I mixed with every one, was pampered and flattered far beyond what was good for me, derived a false notion of my own importance, and when I came to man's estate was, to all intents and purposes, quite unprepared and

unfitted to undertake the duties and responsibilities of my position.

"Fortunately I had the wit to see where the fault lay, and there and then I resolved that if ever I were blessed with a son, I would conduct his education on far different lines. My boy has not met a dozen strangers in his life. His education has been my tenderest care. His position, his duties towards his fellow-men, the responsibilities of his rank, have always been kept rigorously before him. He has been brought up to understand that to be a Duke is not to be a titled nonentity or a pampered *roué*, but to be one whom Providence has blessed with an opportunity of benefiting and watching over the welfare of those less fortunate than himself in the world's good gifts.

"He has no exaggerated idea of his own importance; a humbler lad, I feel justified in saying, you would nowhere find. He has been educated thoroughly, and he has all the best traditions of his race kept continually before his eyes. But you must not imagine, Mr. Hatteras, that because he has not mixed with the world he is ignorant of its temptations. He may not have come into personal contact with them, but he has been warned against their insidious influences, and I shall trust to his personal pride and good instincts to help him to withstand them when he has to encounter them himself. Now, what do you think of my plan for making a nobleman?"

"A very good one, with such a youth as your son, I should think, your Grace; but I would like to make one more suggestion, if you would allow me?"

"And that is?"

"That you should let him travel before he settles down. Choose some fit person to accompany him. Let him have introductions to good people abroad, and let him use them; then he will derive different impressions from different countries, view men and women from different standpoints, and enter gradually into the great world and station which he is some day to adorn."

"I had thought of that myself, and his tutor has lately spoken to me a good deal upon the subject. I must own it is an idea that commends itself strongly to me. I will think it over. And now, sir, I must wish you good-day. You will not let me thank you, as I should have wished, for the service you have rendered my house, but, believe me, I am none the less grateful. By the way, your name is not a common one. May I ask if you have any relatives in this county?"

"Only one at present, I fancy — my father's brother, Sir William Hatteras, of Murdlestone, in the New Forest."

"Ah! I never met him. I knew his brother James very well in my younger days. But he got into sad trouble, poor fellow, and was obliged to fly the country."

"You are speaking of my father. You knew him?"

"Knew him? indeed, I did. And a better fellow never stepped; but, like most of us in those days, too wild — much too wild! And so you are James's son? Well, well! This is indeed a strange coincidence. But, dear me, I am forgetting; I must beg your pardon for speaking so candidly of your father."

"No offence, I'm sure."

"And pray tell me where my old friend is now?"

"Dead, your Grace! He was drowned at sea."

The worthy old gentleman seemed really distressed at this news. He shook his head, and I heard him murmur: "Poor Jim! Poor Jim!"

Then, turning to me again, he took my hand.

"This makes our bond a doubly strong one. You must let me see more of you! How long do you propose remaining in England?"

"Not very much longer, I fear. I am already beginning to hunger for the South again."

"Well, you must not go before you have paid us a visit. Remember we shall always be pleased to see you. You know our house, I think, on the cliff. Good-day, sir, good-day."

So saying, the old gentleman accompanied me downstairs to his carriage, and, shaking me warmly by the hand, departed. Again I had cause to ponder on the strangeness of the fate that had led me to Hampshire — first to the village where my father was born, and then to Bournemouth, where by saving this young man's life I had made a firm friend of a man who again had known my father. By such small coincidences are the currents of our lives diverted.

That same afternoon, while tacking slowly down the bay, I met the Marquis. He was pulling himself in a small skiff,

and when he saw me he made haste to come alongside and hitch on. At first I wondered whether it would not be against his father's wishes that he should enter into conversation with such a worldly person as myself. But he evidently saw what was passing in my mind, and banished all doubts by saying:

"I have been on the look-out for you, Mr. Hatteras. My father has given me permission to cultivate your acquaintance, if you will allow me."

"I shall be very pleased," I answered. "Won't you come aboard and have a chat? I'm not going out of the bay this afternoon."

He clambered over the side and seated himself in the well, clear of the boom, as nice-looking and pleasant a young fellow as any man could wish to set eyes on.

"You can't imagine how I've been thinking over all you told me the other day," he began when we were fairly on our way. "I want you to tell me more about Australia and the life you lead out there, if you will."

"I'll tell you all I can with pleasure," I answered. "But you ought to go and see the places and things for yourself. That's better than any telling. I wish I could take you up and carry you off with me now; away down to where you can make out the green islands peeping out of the water to port and starboard, like bits of the Garden of Eden gone astray and floated out to sea. I'd like you to smell the breezes that come off from them towards evening, to hear the 'trades' whistling overhead, and the thunder of the surf upon the reef. Or at another time to get inside that selfsame reef and look down through the still, transparent water, at the rainbow-coloured fish dashing among the coral boulders, in and out of the most beautiful fairy grottos the brain of man can conceive."

"Oh, it must be lovely! And to think that I may live my life and never see these wonders. Please go on; what else can you tell me?"

"What more do you want to hear? There is the pick of every sort of life for you out there. Would you know what real excitement is? Then I shall take you to a new gold rush. To begin with, you must imagine yourself setting off for the field, with your trusty mate marching step by step beside you, pick and shovel on your shoulders, and both resolved to make your fortunes in the twinkling of an eye. When you get there, there's the digger crowd, composed of every nationality. There's the warden and his staff, the police officers, the shanty keepers, the blacks, and dogs.

"There's the tented valley stretching away to right and left of you, with the constant roar of sluice boxes and cradles, the creak of windlasses, and the perpetual noise of human voices. There's the excitement of pegging out your claim and sinking your first shaft, wondering all the time whether it will turn up trumps or nothing. There's the honest, manly labour from dawn to dusk. And then, when daylight fails, and the lamps begin to sparkle over the field, songs drift up the hillside from the drinking shanties in the valley, and you and your mate weigh up your day's returns, and, having done so, turn into your blankets to dream of the monster nugget you intend to find upon the morrow. Isn't that real life for you?"

He did not answer, but there was a sparkle in his eyes which told me I was understood.

"Then if you want other sorts of enterprise, there is Thursday Island, where I hail from, with its extraordinary people. Let us suppose ourselves wandering down the Front at nightfall, past the Kanaka billiard saloons and the Chinese stores, into, say, the *Hotel of All Nations*. Who is that handsome, dark, mysterious fellow, smoking a cigarette and idly flirting with the pretty bar girl? *You* don't know him, but I do! There's indeed a history for you. You didn't notice, perhaps, that rakish schooner that came to anchor in the bay early in the forenoon. What lines she had! Well, that was his craft. Tomorrow she'll be gone, it is whispered, to try for pearl in prohibited Dutch waters. Can't you imagine her slinking round the islands, watching for the patrolling gunboat, and ready, directly she has passed, to slip into the bay, skim it of its shell, and put to sea again. Sometimes they're chased."

"What then?"

"Well, a clean pair of heels or trouble with the authorities, and possibly a year in a Dutch prison before you're brought to trial! Or would you do a pearling trip in less exciting but more honest fashion? Would you ship aboard a lugger with five good companions, and go a-cruising down the New Guinea coast, working hard all day long, and lying out on deck at night, smoking and listening to the lip-lap of the water against the counter, or spinning yarns of all the world?"

"What else?"

"Why, what more do you want? Do you hanker after a cruise aboard a stinking *bêche-de-mer* boat inside the Barrier Reef, or a run with the sandalwood cutters or tortoiseshell gatherers to New Guinea; or do you want to go ashore again and

try an overlanding trip half across the continent, riding behind your cattle all day long, and standing your watch at night under dripping boughs, your teeth chattering in your head, waiting for the bulls to break, while every moment you expect to hear the Bunyip calling in that lonely water-hole beyond the fringe of Mulga scrub?"

"You make me almost mad with longing."

"And yet, somehow, it doesn't seem so fine when you're at it. It's when you come to look back upon it all from a distance of twelve thousand miles that you feel its real charm. Then it calls to you to return in every rustle of the leaves ashore, in the blue of the sky above, in the ripple of the waves upon the beach. And it eats into your heart, so that you begin to think you will never be happy till you're back in the old tumultuous devil-may-care existence again."

"What a life you've led! And how much more to be envied it seems than the dull monotony of our existence here in sleepy old England."

"Don't you believe it. If you wanted to change I could tell you of dozens of men, living exactly the sort of life I've described, who would only too willingly oblige you. No, no! Believe me, you've got chances of doing things we could never dream of. Do them, then, and let the other go. But all the same, I think you ought to see more of the world I've told you of before you settle down. In fact, I hinted as much to your father only yesterday."

"He said that you had spoken of it to him. Oh, how I wish he would let me go!"

"Somehow, d'you know, I think he will."

I put the cutter over on another tack, and we went crashing back through the blue water towards the pier. The strains of the band came faintly off to us. I had enjoyed my sail, for I had taken a great fancy to this bright young fellow sitting by my side. I felt I should like to have finished the education his father had so gallantly begun. There was something irresistibly attractive about him, so modest, so unassuming, and yet so straightforward and gentlemanly.

Dropping him opposite the bathing machines, I went on to my own anchorage on the other side of the pier. Then I pulled myself ashore and went up to the town. I had forgotten to write an important letter that morning, and as it was essential that the business should be attended to at once, to repair my carelessness, I crossed the public gardens and went through the gardens to the post office to send a telegram.

I must tell you here that since my meeting with Mr. Baxter, the young Marquis's tutor, I had been thinking a great deal about him, and the more I thought the more certain I became that we had met before. To tell the truth, a great distrust of the man was upon me. It was one of those peculiar antipathies that no one can explain. I did not like his face, and I felt sure that he did not boast any too much love for me.

As my thoughts were still occupied with him, my astonishment may be imagined, on arriving at the building, at meeting him face to face upon the steps. He seemed much put out at seeing me, and hummed and hawed over his "Good-afternoon" for all the world as if I had caught him in the middle of some guilty action.

Returning his salutation, I entered the building and looked about me for a desk at which to write my wire. There was only one vacant, and I noticed that the pencil suspended on the string was still swinging to and fro as it had been dropped. Now Baxter had only just left the building, so there could be no possible doubt that it was he who had last used the stand. I pulled the form towards me and prepared to write. But as I did so I noticed that the previous writer had pressed so hard upon his pencil that he had left the exact impression of his message plainly visible upon the pad. It ran as follows:

"Letter received. You omitted reverend. The train is laid, but a new element of danger has arisen."

It was addressed to "Nikola, *Green Sailor Hotel*, East India Dock Road, London," and was signed "Nineveh."

The message was so curious that I looked at it again, and the longer I looked the more certain I became that Baxter was the sender. Partly because its wording interested me, and partly for another reason which will become apparent later on, I inked the message over, tore it from the pad, and placed it carefully in my pocket-book. One thing at least was certain, and that was, if Baxter *were* the sender, there was something underhand going on. If he were not, well, then there could be no possible harm in my keeping the form as a little souvenir of a rather curious experience.

I wrote my own message, and having paid for it left the office. But I was not destined to have the society of my own thoughts for long. Hardly had I reached the Invalids' Walk before I felt my arm touched. To my supreme astonishment I found myself again confronted by Mr. Baxter. He was now perfectly calm and greeted me with extraordinary civility.

"Mr. Hatteras, I believe," he said. "I think I had the pleasure of meeting you on the sands a few days ago. What a

beautiful day it is, isn't it? Are you proceeding this way? Yes? Then perhaps I may be permitted the honour of walking a short distance with you."

"With pleasure," I replied. "I am going up the cliff to my hotel, and I shall be glad of your company. I think we met in the telegraph office just now."

"In the post office, I think. I had occasion to go in there to register a letter."

His speech struck me as remarkable. My observation was so trivial that it hardly needed an answer, and yet not only did he vouchsafe me one, but he corrected my statement and volunteered a further one on his own account. What reason could he have for wanting to make me understand that he had gone in there to post a letter? What would it have mattered to me if he *had* been there, as I suggested, to send a telegram?

"Mr. Baxter," I thought to myself, "I've got a sort of conviction that you're not the man you pretend to be, and what's more I'd like to bet a shilling to a halfpenny that, if the truth were only known, you're our mysterious friend Nineveh."

We walked for some distance in silence. Presently my companion began to talk again — this time, however, in a new strain, and perhaps with a little more caution.

"You have been a great traveller, I understand."

"A fairly great one, Mr. Baxter. You also, I am told, have seen something of the world."

"A little — very little."

"The South Seas, I believe. D'you know Papeete?"

"I have been there."

"D'you know New Guinea at all?"

"No. I was never near it. I am better acquainted with the Far East — China, Japan, etc."

Suddenly something, I shall never be able to tell what, prompted me to say:

"And the Andamans?"

The effect on my companion was as sudden as it was extraordinary. For a moment he staggered on the path like a drunken man; his face grew ashen pale, and he had to give utterance to a hoarse choking sound before he could get out a word. Then he said:

"No — no — you are quite mistaken, I assure you. I never knew the Andamans."

Now, on the Andamans, as all the world knows, are located the Indian penal establishments, and noting his behaviour, I became more and more convinced in my own mind that there was some mystery about Mr. Baxter that had yet to be explained. I had still a trump card to play.

"I'm afraid you are not very well, Mr. Baxter," I said at length. "Perhaps the heat is too much for you, or we are walking too fast? This is my hotel. Won't you come inside and take a glass of wine or something to revive you?"

He nodded his head eagerly. Large drops of perspiration stood on his forehead, and I saw that he was quite unstrung. "I am not well — not at all well."

As soon as we reached the smoking-room I rang for two brandies and sodas. When they arrived he drank his off almost at a gulp, and in a few seconds was pretty well himself again.

"Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Hatteras," he said. "I think we must have walked up the hill a little too fast for my strength. Now, I must be going back to the town. I find I have forgotten something."

Almost by instinct I guessed his errand. He was going to despatch another telegram. Resolved to try the effect of one parting shot, I said:

"Perhaps you do not happen to be going near the telegraph office again? If you are, should I be taxing your kindness too much if I asked you to leave a message there for me? I find I have forgotten one."

He bowed and simply said: "With much pleasure."

He pronounced it "pleasure," and as he said it he licked his lips in his usual self-satisfied fashion. I wondered how he would conduct himself when he saw the message I was going to write.

Taking a form from a table near where I sat, I wrote the following:

"John Nicholson,

"Langham Hotel, London.

"The train is laid, but a new danger has arisen.

"Hatteras."

Blotting it carefully, I gave it into his hands, at the same time asking him to read it, lest my writing should not be decipherable and any question might be asked concerning it. As he read I watched his face intently. Never shall I forget the expression that swept over it. I had scored a complete victory. The shaft went home. But only for an instant. With wonderful alacrity he recovered himself and, shaking me feebly by the hand, bade me good-bye, promising to see that my message was properly delivered. When he had gone I laid myself back in my chair for a good think. The situation was a peculiar one in every way. If he were up to some devilry I had probably warned him. If not, why had he betrayed himself so openly?

Half an hour later an answer to my first telegram arrived, and, such is the working of Fate, it necessitated my immediate return to London. I had been thinking of going for some days past, but had put it off. Now it was decided for me.

As I did not know whether I should return to Bournemouth, I determined to call upon the Marquis to bid him good-bye. Accordingly I set off for the house.

Now if Burke may be believed, the Duke of Glenbarth possesses houses in half the counties of the kingdom; but I am told his seaside residence takes precedence of them all in his affections. Standing well out on the cliffs, it commands a lovely view of the bay — looks toward the Purbeck Hills on the right, and the Isle of Wight and Hengistbury Head on the left. The house itself, as far as I could see, left nothing to be desired, and the grounds had been beautified in the highest form of landscape gardening.

I found my friend and his father in a summer-house upon the lawn. Both appeared unaffectedly glad to see me, and equally sorry to hear that I had come to bid them good bye. Mr. Baxter was not visible, and it was with no little surprise I learned that he, too, was contemplating a trip to the metropolis.

"I hope, if ever you visit Bournemouth again, you will come and see us," said the Duke as I rose to leave.

"Thank you," said I, "and I hope if ever your son visits Australia you will permit me to be of some service to him."

"You are very kind. I will bear your offer in mind."

Shaking hands with them both, I bade them good-bye, and went out through the gate.

But I was not to escape without an interview with my clerical friend after all. As I left the grounds and turned into the public road I saw a man emerge from a little wicket gate some fifty yards or so further down the hedge. From the way he made his appearance, it was obvious he had been waiting for me to leave the house.

It was, certainly enough, my old friend Baxter. As I came up with him he said, with the same sanctimonious grin that usually encircled his mouth playing round it now:

"A nice evening for a stroll, Mr. Hatteras."

"A very nice evening, as you say, Mr. Baxter."

"May I intrude myself upon your privacy for five minutes?"

"With pleasure. What is your business?"

"Of small concern to you, sir, but of immense importance to me. Mr. Hatteras, I have it in my mind that you do not like me."

"I hope I have not given you cause to think so. Pray what can have put such a notion into your head?"

I half hoped that he would make some allusion to the telegram he had despatched for me that morning, but he was far too cunning for that. He looked me over and over out of his small ferrety eyes before he replied:

"I cannot tell you why I think so, Mr. Hatteras, but instinct generally makes us aware when we are not quite all we might be to other people. Forgive me for speaking in this way to you, but you must surely see how much it means to me to be on good terms with friends of my employer's family."

"You are surely not afraid lest I should prejudice the Duke against you?"

"Not afraid, Mr. Hatteras! I have too much faith in your sense of justice to believe that you would willingly deprive me

of my means of livelihood — for of course that is what it would mean in plain English.”

“Then you need have no fear. I have just said good-bye to them. I am going away to-morrow, and it is improbable that I shall ever see either of them again.”

“You are leaving for Australia?”

“Very shortly, I think.”

“I am much obliged to you for the generous way you have treated me. I shall never forget your kindness.”

“Pray don’t mention it. Is that all you have to say to me? Then good-evening!”

“Good-evening, Mr. Hatteras.”

He turned back, and I continued my way along the cliff, reflecting on the curious interview I had just passed through. If the truth must be known, I was quite at a loss to understand what he meant by it! Why had he asked that question about Australia? Was it only chance that had led him to put it, or was it done designedly, and for some reason connected with that mysterious “train” mentioned in his telegram?

I was to find out later, and only too thoroughly!



CHAPTER 6

I MEET DR. NIKOLA AGAIN

It is strange with what ease, rapidity, and apparent unconsciousness the average man jumps from crisis to crisis in that strange medley he is accustomed so flippantly to call His Life. It was so in my case. For two days after my return from Bournemouth I was completely immersed in the toils of Hatton Garden, had no thought above the sale of pearls and the fluctuations in the price of shell; yet, notwithstanding all this, the afternoon of the third day found me kicking my heels on the pavement of Trafalgar Square, my mind quite made up, my passage booked, and my ticket for Australia stowed away in my waistcoat pocket.

As I stood there the grim, stone faces of the lions above me were somehow seen obscurely, Nelson's monument was equally unregarded, for my thoughts were far away with my mind's eye, following an ocean mail-steamer as she threaded her tortuous way between the Heads and along the placid waters of Sydney Harbour.

So wrapped up was I in the folds of this agreeable reverie, that when I felt a heavy hand upon my shoulder and heard a masculine voice say joyfully in my ear, "Dick Hatteras, or I'm a Dutchman," I started as if I had been shot.

Brief as was the time given me for reflection, it was long enough for that voice to conjure up a complete scene in my mind. The last time I had heard it was on the bridge of the steamer *Yarraman*, lying in the land-locked harbour of Cairns, on the Eastern Queensland coast; a canoe of darkies were jabbering alongside, and a cargo of bananas was being shipped aboard.

I turned and held out my hand. "Jim Percival!" I cried, with as much pleasure as astonishment. "How on earth does it come about that you are here?"

"Arrived three days ago," the good-looking young fellow replied. "We're lying in the River just off the West India Docks. The old man kept us at it like galley slaves till I began to think we should never get the cargo out. Been up to the office this morning, coming back saw you standing here looking as if you were thinking of something ten thousand miles away. I tell you I nearly jumped out of my skin with astonishment, thought there couldn't be two men with the same face and build, so smacked you on the back, discovered I was right, and here we are. Now spin your yarn. But stay, let's first find a more convenient place than this."

We strolled down the Strand together, and at last had the good fortune to discover a "house of call" that met with even his critical approval. Here I narrated as much of my doings since we had last met, as I thought would satisfy his curiosity. My meeting with that mysterious individual at the French restaurant and my suspicions of Baxter particularly amused him.

"What a rum beggar you are, to be sure!" was his disconcerting criticism when I had finished. "What earthly reason have you for thinking that this chap, Baxter, has any designs upon your young swell, Beckenham, or whatever his name may be?"

"What makes you stand by to shorten sail, when you see a suspicious look about the sky? Instinct, isn't it?"

"That's a poor way out of the argument."

"Well, at any rate, time will show how far I'm right or wrong; though I don't suppose I shall hear any more of the affair, as I return to Australia in the *Saratoga* on Friday next."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"I haven't the remotest idea. My business is completed, and I'm just kicking my heels in idleness till Friday comes and it is time for me to set off."

"Then I have it. You'll just come along down to the docks with me; I'm due back at the old hooker at five sharp. You'll dine with us — pot luck, of course. Your old friend Riley is still chief officer; I'm second; young Cleary, whom you remember as apprentice, is now third; and, if I'm not very much mistaken, we'll find old Donald Maclean aboard too, tinkering away at his beloved engines. I don't believe that fellow could take a holiday away from his thrust blocks and piston rods if he were paid to. We'll have a palaver about old times, and I'll put you ashore myself when you want to go.

There, what do you say?"

"I'm your man," said I, jumping at his offer with an alacrity which must have been flattering to him.

The truth was, I was delighted to have secured some sort of companionship, for London, despite its multitudinous places of amusement, and its five millions of inhabitants, is but a dismal caravanserai to be left alone in. Moreover, the *Yarraman's* officers and I were old friends, and, if the truth must be told, my heart yearned for the sight of a ship and a talk about days gone by.

Accordingly, we made our way to the docks.

The *Yarraman*, travel-stained, and bearing on her weather-beaten plates evidences of the continuous tramp-like life she had led, lay well out in the stream. Having chartered a waterman, we were put on board, and I had the satisfaction of renewing my acquaintance with the chief officer, Riley, at the yawning mouth of the for'ard hatch. The whilom apprentice, Cleary, now raised to the dignity of third officer, grinned a welcome to me from among the disordered raffle of the fo'c's'le head, while that excellent artificer, Maclean, oil-can and spanner in hand, greeted me affectionately in Gaelic from the entrance to the engine-room. The skipper was ashore, so I seated myself on the steps leading to the hurricane deck, and felt at home immediately.

Upon the circumstances attending that reunion there is no necessity for me to dwell. Suffice it that we dined in the deserted saloon, and adjourned later to my friend Percival's cabin in the alley way just for'ard of the engine-room, where several bottles of Scotch whisky, a strange collection of glass ware, and an assortment of excellent cigars, were produced. Percival and Cleary, being the juniors, ensconced themselves on the top bunk; Maclean (who had been induced to abandon his machinery in honour of our meeting) was given the washhand-stand. Riley took the cushioned locker in the corner, while I, as their guest, was permitted the luxury of a canvas-backed deck chair, the initials on the back of which were not those of its present owner. At first the conversation was circumscribed, and embraced Plimsoll, the attractions of London, and the decline in the price of freight; but, as the contents of the second bottle waned, speech became more unfettered, and the talk drifted into channels and latitudes widely different. Circumstances connected with bygone days were recalled; the faces of friends long hidden in the mists of time were brought again to mind; anecdotes illustrative of various types of maritime character succeeded to each other in brisk succession, till Maclean, without warning, finding his voice, burst into incongruous melody. One song suggested another; a banjo was produced, and tuned to the noise of clinking glasses; and every moment the atmosphere grew thicker.

How long this concert would have lasted I cannot say, but I remember, after the third repetition of the chorus of the sea-chanty that might have been heard a mile away, glancing at my watch and discovering to my astonishment that it was past ten o'clock. Then rising to my feet I resisted all temptations to stay the night, and reminded my friend Percival of his promise to put me ashore again. He was true to his word, and five minutes later we were shoving off from the ship's side amid the valedictions of my hosts. I have a recollection to this day of the face of the chief engineer gazing sadly down upon me from the bulwarks, while his quavering voice asserted the fact, in dolorous tones, that

"Aft hae I rov'd by bonny Doon,
To see the rose and woodbine twine;
And ilka bird sang o' its luve,
And fondly sae did I o' mine."

With this amorous farewell still ringing in my ears I landed at Limehouse Pier, and bidding my friend good-bye betook myself by the circuitous route of Emmett and Ropemaker Streets and Church Row to that aristocratic thoroughfare known as the East India Dock Road.

The night was dark and a thick rain was falling, presenting the mean-looking houses, muddy road, and foot-stained pavements in an aspect that was even more depressing than was usual to them. Despite the inclemency of the weather and the lateness of the hour, however, the street was crowded; blackguard men and foul-mouthed women, such a class as I had never in all my experience of rough folk encountered before, jostled each other on the pavements with scant ceremony; costermongers cried their wares, small boys dashed in and out of the crowd at top speed, and flaring gin palaces took in and threw out continuous streams of victims.

For some minutes I stood watching this melancholy picture, contrasting it with others in my mind. Then turning to my

left hand I pursued my way in the direction I imagined the Stepney railway station to lie. It was not pleasant walking, but I was interested in the life about me — the people, the shops, the costermongers' barrows, and I might even say the public-houses.

I had not made my way more than a hundred yards along the street when an incident occurred that was destined to bring with it a train of highly important circumstances. As I crossed the entrance to a small side street, the door of an ill-looking tavern was suddenly thrust open and the body of a man was propelled from it, with a considerable amount of violence, directly into my arms. Having no desire to act as his support I pushed him from me, and as I did so glanced at the door through which he had come. Upon the glass was a picture, presumably nautical, and under it this legend, "The Green Sailor." In a flash Bournemouth post office rose before my mind's eye, the startled face of Baxter on the door-step, the swinging pencil on the telegraph stand, and the imprint of the mysterious message addressed to "Nikola, *Green Sailor Hotel*, East India Dock Road." So complete was my astonishment that at first I could do nothing but stand stupidly staring at it, then my curiosity asserted itself and, seeking the private entrance, I stepped inside. A short passage conducted me to a small and evil-smelling room abutting on the bar. On the popular side of the counter the place was crowded; in the chamber where I found myself I was the sole customer. A small table stood in the centre, and round this two or three chairs were ranged, while several pugnacious prints lent an air of decoration to the walls.

On the other side, to the left of that through which I had entered, a curtained doorway hinted at a similar room beyond. A small but heavily-built man, whom I rightly judged to be the landlord, was busily engaged with an assistant, dispensing liquor at the counter, but when I rapped upon the table he forsook his customers, and came to learn my wishes. I called for a glass of whisky, and seated myself at the table preparatory to commencing my inquiries as to the existence of Baxter's mysterious friend. But at the moment that I was putting my first question the door behind the half-drawn curtain, which must have been insecurely fastened, opened about an inch, and a voice greeted my ears that brought me up all standing with surprise. *It was the voice of Baxter himself.*

"I assure you," he was saying, "it was desperate work from beginning to end, and I was never so relieved in my life as when I discovered that he had really come to say good-bye."

At this juncture one of them must have realized that the door was open, for I heard some one rise from his chair and come towards it. Acting under the influence of a curiosity, which was as baneful to himself as it was fortunate for me, before closing it he opened the door wider and looked into the room where I sat. It was Baxter, and if I live to be an hundred I shall not forget the expression on his face as his eyes fell upon me.

"Mr. Hatteras!" he gasped, clutching at the wall.

Resolved to take him at a disadvantage, I rushed towards him and shook him warmly by the hand, at the same time noticing that he had discarded his clerical costume. It was too late now for him to pretend that he did not know me, and as I had taken the precaution to place my foot against it, it was equally impossible for him to shut the door. Seeing this he felt compelled to surrender, and I will do him the justice to admit that he did it with as good a grace as possible.

"Mr. Baxter," I said, "this is the last place I should have expected to meet you in. May I come in and sit down?"

Without giving him time to reply I entered the room, resolved to see who his companion might be. Of course, in my own mind I had quite settled that it was the person to whom he had telegraphed from Bournemouth — in other words Nikola. But who was Nikola? And had I ever seen him before?

My curiosity was destined to be satisfied, and in a most unexpected fashion. For there, sitting at the table, a half-smoked cigarette between his fingers, and his face turned towards me, was the man whom I had seen playing chess in the restaurant, the man who had told me my name by the cards in my pocket, and the man who had warned me in such a mysterious fashion about my sweetheart's departure. He was Baxter's correspondent! He was Nikola!

Whatever my surprise may have been, he was not in the least disconcerted, but rose calmly from his seat and proffered me his hand, saying as he did so:

"Good-evening, Mr. Hatteras. I am delighted to see you, and still more pleased to learn that you and my worthy old friend, Baxter, have met before. Won't you sit down?"

I seated myself on a chair at the further end of the table; Baxter meanwhile looked from one to the other of us as if uncertain whether to go or stay. Presently, however, he seemed to make up his mind, and advancing towards Nikola, said, with an earnestness that I could see was assumed for the purpose of putting me off the scent:

"And so I cannot induce you, Dr. Nikola, to fit out an expedition for the work I have named?"

"If I had five thousand pounds to throw away," replied Nikola, "I might think of it, Mr. Baxter, but as I haven't you must understand that it is impossible." Then seeing that the other was anxious to be going, he continued, "Must you be off? then good-night."

Baxter shook hands with us both with laboured cordiality, and having done so slunk from the room. When the door closed upon him Nikola turned to me.

"There must be some fascination about a missionary's life after all," he said. "My old tutor, Baxter, as you are aware, has a comfortable position with the young Marquis of Beckenham, which, if he conducts himself properly, may lead to something really worth having in the future, and yet here he is anxious to surrender it in order to go back to his work in New Guinea, to his hard life, insufficient food, and almost certain death."

"He was in New Guinea then?"

"Five years — so he tells me."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then all I can say is that, in spite of his cloth, Mr. Baxter does not always tell the truth."

"I am sorry you should think that. Pray what reason have you for saying so?"

"Simply because in a conversation I had with him at Bournemouth he deliberately informed me that he had never been near New Guinea in his life."

"You must have misunderstood him. However, that has nothing to do with us. Let us turn to a pleasanter subject."

He rang the bell, and the landlord having answered it, ordered more refreshment. When it arrived he lit another cigarette, and leaning back in his chair glanced at me through half-closed eyes.

Then occurred one of the most curious and weird circumstances connected with this meeting. Hardly had he laid himself back in his chair before I heard a faint scratching against the table leg, and next moment an enormous cat, black as the Pit of Tophet, sprang with a bound upon the table and stood there steadfastly regarding me, its eyes flashing and its back arched. I have seen cats without number, Chinese, Persian, Manx, the Australian wild cat, and the English tabby, but never in the whole course of my existence such another as that owned by Dr. Nikola. When it had regarded me with its evil eyes for nearly a minute, it stepped daintily across to its master, and rubbed itself backwards and forwards against his arm, then to my astonishment it clambered up on to his shoulder and again gave me the benefit of its fixed attention. Dr. Nikola must have observed the amazement depicted in my face, for he smiled in a curious fashion, and coaxing the beast down into his lap fell to stroking its fur with his long, white fingers. It was as uncanny a performance as ever I had the privilege of witnessing.

"And so, Mr. Hatteras," he said slowly, "you are thinking of leaving us?"

"I am," I replied, with a little start of natural astonishment. "But how did you know it?"

"After the conjuring tricks — we agreed to call them conjuring tricks, I think — I showed you a week or two ago, I wonder that you should ask such a question. You have the ticket in your pocket even now."

All the time he had been speaking his extraordinary eyes had never left my face; they seemed to be reading my very soul, and his cat ably seconded his efforts.

"By the way, I should like to ask you a few questions about those self same conjuring tricks," I said. "Do you know you gave me a most peculiar warning?"

"I am very glad to hear it; I hope you profited by it."

"It cost me a good deal of uneasiness, if that's any consolation to you. I want to know how you did it?"

"My fame as a wizard would soon evaporate if I revealed my methods," he answered, still looking steadfastly at me. "However, I will give you another exhibition of my powers. In fact, another warning. Have you confidence enough in me to accept it?"

"I'll wait and see what it is first," I replied cautiously, trying to remove my eyes from his.

"Well, my warning to you is this — you intend to sail in the *Saratoga* for Australia on Friday next, don't you? Well, then, don't go; as you love your life, don't go!"

“Good gracious! and why on earth not?” I cried.

He stared fixedly at me for more than half a minute before he answered. There was no escaping those dreadful eyes, and the regular sweep of those long white fingers on the cat’s black fur seemed to send a cold shiver right down my spine. Bit by bit I began to feel a curious sensation of dizziness creeping over me.

“Because you will *not* go. You cannot go. I forbid you to go.”

I roused myself with an effort, and sprang to my feet, crying as I did so:

“And what right have *you* to forbid me to do anything? I’ll go on Friday, come what may. And I’d like to see the man who will prevent me.”

Though he must have realized that his attempt to hypnotize me (for attempt it certainly was) had proved a failure, he was not in the least disconcerted.

“My dear fellow,” he murmured gently, knocking off the ash of his cigarette against the table edge as he did so, “no one is seeking to prevent you. I gave you, at your own request — you will do me the justice to admit that — a little piece of advice. If you do not care to follow it, that is your concern, not mine; but pray do not blame me. Must you really go now? Then good-night, and good-bye, for I don’t suppose I shall see you this side of the Line again.”

I took his proffered hand, and wished him good-night. Having done so, I left the house, heartily glad to have said good-bye to the only man in my life whom I have really feared.

When in the train, on my way back to town, I came to review the meeting in the *Green Sailor*, I found myself face to face with a series of problems very difficult to work out. How had Nikola first learned my name? How had he heard of the Wetherells? Was he the mysterious person his meeting with whom had driven Wetherell out of England? Why had Baxter telegraphed to him that “the train was laid”? Was I the new danger that had arisen? How had Baxter come to be at the *Green Sailor*, in non-clerical costume? Why had he been so disturbed at my entry? Why had Nikola invented such a lame excuse to account for his presence there? Why had he warned me not to sail in the *Saratoga*? and, above all, why had he resorted to hypnotism to secure his ends?

I asked myself these questions, but one by one I failed to answer them to my satisfaction. Whatever other conclusion I might have come to, however, one thing at least was certain: that was, that my original supposition was a correct one. There was a tremendous mystery somewhere. Whether or not I was to lose my interest in it after Friday remained to be seen.

It was nearly twelve o’clock by the time I entered my hotel; but late as it was I found time to examine the letter rack. It contained two envelopes bearing my name, and taking them out I carried them with me to my room. One, to my delight, bore the postmark of Port Said, and was addressed in my sweetheart’s handwriting. You may guess how eagerly I tore it open, and with what avidity I devoured its contents. From it I gathered that they had arrived at the entrance of the Suez Canal safely; that her father had recovered his spirits more and more with every mile that separated him from Europe. He was now almost himself again, she said, but still refused with characteristic determination to entertain the smallest notion of myself as a son-in-law. But Phyllis herself did not despair of being able to talk him round. Then came a paragraph which struck me as being so peculiar as to warrant my reproducing it here:

“The passengers, what we have seen of them, appear to be, with one exception, a nice enough set of people. That exception, however, is intolerable; his name is Prendergast, and his personal appearance is as objectionable as his behaviour is extraordinary; his hair is snow-white, and his face is deeply pitted with smallpox. This is, of course, not his fault, but it seems somehow to aggravate the distaste I have for him. Unfortunately we were thrown into his company in Naples, and since then the creature has so far presumed upon that introduction, that he scarcely leaves me alone for a moment. Papa does not seem to mind him so much, but I thank goodness that, as he leaves the boat in Port Said, the rest of the voyage will be performed without him.”

The remainder of the letter had no concern for any one but myself, so I do not give it. Having read it I folded it up and put it in my pocket, feeling that if I had been on board the boat I should in all probability have allowed Mr. Prendergast to understand that his attentions were distasteful and not in the least required. If I could only have foreseen that within a fortnight I was to be enjoying the doubtful pleasure of that very gentleman’s society, under circumstances as important as life and death, I don’t doubt I should have thought still more strongly on the subject.

The handwriting of the second envelope was bold, full of character, but quite unknown to me. I opened it with a little

feeling of curiosity, and glanced at the signature, "Beckenham." It ran as follows:—

"West Cliff, Bournemouth,

"Tuesday Evening.

"My dear Mr. Hatteras,

"I have great and wonderful news to tell you! This week has proved an extraordinarily eventful one for me, for what do you think? My father has suddenly decided that I shall travel. All the details have been settled in a great hurry. You will understand this when I tell you that Mr. Baxter and I sail for Sydney in the steamship *Saratoga* next week. My father telegraphed to Mr. Baxter, who is in London, to book our passages and to choose our cabins this morning. I can only say that my greatest wish is that you were coming with us. Is it so impossible? Cannot you make your arrangements fit in? We shall travel overland to Naples and join the boat there. This is Mr. Baxter's proposition, and you may be sure, considering what I shall see *en route*, I have no objection to urge against it. Our tour will be an extensive one. We visit Australia and New Zealand, go thence to Honolulu, thence to San Francisco, returning, across the United States, *via* Canada, to Liverpool.

"You may imagine how excited I am at the prospect, and as I feel that I owe a great measure of my good fortune to you, I want to be the first to acquaint you of it.

"Yours ever sincerely,

"Beckenham."

I read the letter through a second time, and then sat down on my bed to think it out. One thing was self-evident. I knew now how Nikola had become aware that I was going to sail in the mail boat on Friday; Baxter had seen my name in the passenger list, and had informed him.

I undressed and went to bed, but not to sleep. I had a problem to work out, and a more than usually difficult one it was. Here was the young Marquis of Beckenham, I told myself, only son of his father, heir to a great name and enormous estates, induced to travel by my representations. There was a conspiracy afoot in which, I could not help feeling certain, the young man was in some way involved. And yet I had no right to be certain about it after all, for my suspicions at best were only conjectures. Now the question was whether I ought to warn the Duke or not? If I did I might be frightening him without cause, and might stop his son's journey; and if I did not, and things went wrong — well, in that case, I should be the innocent means of bringing a great and lasting sorrow upon his house. Hour after hour I turned this question over and over in my mind, uncertain how to act. The clocks chimed their monotonous round, the noises died down and rose again in the streets, and daylight found me only just come to a decision. I would *not* tell them; but at the same time I would make doubly sure that I sailed aboard that ship myself, and that throughout the voyage I was by the young man's side to guard him from ill.

Breakfast time came, and I rose from my bed wearied with thought. Even a bath failed to restore my spirits. I went downstairs and, crossing the hall again, examined the rack. Another letter awaited me. I passed into the dining-room and, seating myself at my table, ordered breakfast. Having done so, I turned to my correspondence. Fate seemed to pursue me. On this occasion the letter was from the lad's father, the Duke of Glenbarth himself, and ran as follows:—

"Sandridge Castle, Bournemouth,

"Wednesday.

"Dear Mr. Hatteras,

"My son tells me he has acquainted you with the news of his departure for Australia next week. I don't doubt this will cause you some little surprise; but it has been brought about by a curious combination of circumstances. Two days ago I received a letter from my old friend, the Earl of Amberley, who, as you know, has for the past few years been Governor of the colony of New South Wales, telling me that his term of office will expire in four months. Though he has not seen my boy since the latter was two years old, I am anxious that he should be at the head of affairs when he visits the colony. Hence this haste. I should have liked nothing better than to have accompanied him myself, but business of the utmost importance detains me in England. I am, however, sending Mr. Baxter with him, with powerful credentials, and if it should be in your power to do anything to assist them you will be adding materially to the debt of gratitude I already owe you.

"Believe me, my dear Mr. Hatteras, to be,

“Very truly yours,
”Glenbarth.”

My breakfast finished, I answered both these letters, informed my friends of my contemplated departure by the same steamer, and promised that I would do all that lay in my power to ensure both the young traveller’s pleasure and his safety. For the rest of the morning I was occupied inditing a letter to my sweetheart, informing her of my return to the Colonies, and telling her all my adventures since her departure.

The afternoon was spent in saying good-bye to the few business friends I had made in London, and in the evening I went for the last time to a theatre.

Five minutes to eleven o’clock next morning found me at Waterloo sitting in a first-class compartment of the West of England express, bound for Plymouth and Australia. Though the platform was crowded to excess I had the carriage so far to myself, and was about to congratulate myself on my good fortune, when a porter appeared on the scene, and deposited a bag in the opposite corner. A moment later, and just as the train was in motion, a man jumped in the carriage, tipped the servant, and then placed a basket upon the rack. The train was half-way out of the station before he turned round, and my suspicions were confirmed. *It was Dr. Nikola!*

Though he must have known who his companion was, he affected great surprise. “Mr. Hatteras,” he cried, “I think this is the most extraordinary coincidence I have ever experienced in my life.”

“Why so?” I asked. “You knew I was going to Plymouth to-day, and one moment’s reflection must have told you, that as my boat sails at eight, I would be certain to take the morning express, which lands me there at five. Should I be indiscreet if I asked where you may be going?”

“Like yourself, I am also visiting Plymouth,” he answered, taking the basket, before mentioned, down from the rack, and drawing a French novel from his coat pocket. “I expect an old Indian friend home by the mail boat that arrives to-night. I am going down to meet him.”

I felt relieved to hear that he was not thinking of sailing in the *Saratoga*, and after a few polite commonplaces, we both lapsed into silence. I was too suspicious, and he was too wary, to appear over friendly. Clapham, Wimbledon, Surbiton, came and went. Weybridge and Woking flashed by at lightning speed, and even Basingstoke was reached before we spoke again. That station behind us, Dr. Nikola took the basket before mentioned on his knee, and opened it. When he had done so, the same enormous black cat, whose acquaintance I had made in the East India Dock Road, stepped proudly forth. In the daylight the brute looked even larger and certainly fiercer than before. I felt I should have liked nothing better than to have taken it by the tail and hurled it out of the window. Nikola, on the other hand, seemed to entertain for it the most extraordinary affection.

Now such was this marvellous man’s power of fascination that by the time we reached Andover Junction his conversation had roused me quite out of myself, had made me forget my previous distrust of him, and enabled me to tell myself that this railway journey was one of the most enjoyable I had ever undertaken.

In Salisbury we took luncheon baskets on board, with, two bottles of champagne, for which my companion, in spite of my vigorous protest, would insist upon paying.

As the train rolled along the charming valley, in which lie the miniature towns of Wilton, Dinton, and Tisbury, we pledged each other in right good fellowship, and by the time Exeter was reached were friendly enough to have journeyed round the world together.

Exeter behind us, I began to feel drowsy, and presently was fast asleep.

I remember no more of that ill-fated journey; nor, indeed, have I any recollection of anything at all, until I woke up in Room No. 37 of the *Ship and Vulture Hotel* in Plymouth.

The sunshine was streaming in through the slats of the Venetian blinds, and a portly gentleman, with a rosy face, and grey hair, was standing by my bedside, holding my wrist in his hand, and calmly scrutinizing me. A nurse in hospital dress stood beside him.

“I think he’ll do now,” he said to her as he rubbed his plump hands together; “but I’ll look round in the course of the afternoon.”

“One moment,” I said feebly, for I found I was too weak to speak above a whisper. “Would you mind telling me where I

am, and what is the matter with me?"

"I should very much like to be able to do so," was the doctor's reply. "My opinion is, if you want me to be candid, that you have been drugged and well-nigh poisoned by a remarkably clever chemist. But what the drug and poison were, and who administered it to you, and the motive for doing so, is more than I can tell you. From what I can learn from the hotel proprietors, you were brought here from the railway station in a cab last night by a gentleman who happened to find you in the carriage in which you travelled down from London. You were in such a curious condition that I was sent for and this nurse procured. Now you know all about it."

"What day did you say this is?"

"Saturday, to be sure."

"Saturday!" I cried. "You don't mean that! Then, by Jove, I've missed the *Saratoga* after all. Here, let me get up! And tell them downstairs to send for the Inspector of Police. I have got to get to the bottom of this."

I sat up in bed, but was only too glad to lie down. I looked at the doctor.

"How long before you can have me fit to travel?"

"Give yourself three days' rest and quiet," he replied, "and we'll see what we can do."

"Three days? And two days and a half to cross the Continent, that's five and a half — say six days. Good! I'll catch the boat in Naples, and then, Dr. Nikola, if you're aboard, as I suspect, I advise you to look out."



CHAPTER 7

PORT SAID, AND WHAT BEFEL US THERE

Fortunately for me my arrangements fitted in exactly, so that at one thirty p.m., on the seventh day after my fatal meeting with Dr. Nikola in the West of England express, I had crossed the Continent, and stood looking out on the blue waters of Naples Bay. To my right was the hill of San Martino, behind me that of Capo di Monte, while in the distance, to the southward, rose the cloud-tipped summit of Vesuvius. The journey from London is generally considered, I believe, a long and wearisome one; it certainly proved so to me, for it must be remembered that my mind was impatient of every delay, while my bodily health was not as yet recovered.

The first thing to be done on arrival at the terminus was to discover a quiet hotel; a place where I could rest and recoup during the heat of the day, and, what was perhaps more important, where I should run no risk of meeting with Dr. Nikola or his satellites. I had originally intended calling at the office of the steamship company in order to explain the reason of my not joining the boat in Plymouth, planning afterwards to cast about me, among the various hotels, for the Marquis of Beckenham and Mr. Baxter. But, on second thoughts, I saw the wisdom of abandoning both these courses.

Nor for the same reason did I feel inclined to board the steamer, which I could see lying out in the harbour, until darkness had fallen. I ascertained, however, that she was due to sail at midnight, and that the mails were already being got aboard.

Almost exactly as eight o'clock was striking, I mounted the gangway, and strolled down the promenade deck to the first saloon entrance; then calling a steward to my assistance, I had my baggage conveyed to my cabin, where I set to work arranging my little knicknacks, and making myself comfortable for the voyage that lay before us. So far I had seen nothing of my friends, and, on making inquiries, I discovered that they had not yet come aboard. Indeed, they did not do so until the last boat had discharged its burden at the gangway. Then I met Lord Beckenham on the promenade deck, and unaffected was the young man's delight at seeing me.

"Mr. Hatteras," he cried, running forward to greet me with out-stretched hand, "this was all that was wanting to make my happiness complete. I *am* glad to see you. I hope your cabin is near ours."

"I'm on the port side just abaft the pantry," I answered, shaking him by the hand. "But tell me about yourself. I expect you had a pleasant journey across the Continent."

"Delightful!" was his reply. "We stayed a day in Paris, and another in Rome, and since we have been here we have been rushing about seeing everything, like a regulation pair of British tourists."

At this moment Mr. Baxter, who had been looking after the luggage, I suppose, made his appearance, and greeted me with more cordiality than I had expected him to show. To my intense surprise, however, he allowed no sign of astonishment to escape him at my having joined the boat after all. But a few minutes later, as we were approaching the companion steps, he said:—"I understood from his lordship, Mr. Hatteras, that you were to embark at Plymouth; was I mistaken, therefore, when I thought I saw you coming off with your luggage this evening?"

"No, you were not mistaken," I answered, being able now to account for this lack of surprise. "I came across the Continent like yourselves, and only joined the vessel a couple of hours ago."

Here the Marquis chimed in, and diverted the conversation into another channel.

"Where is everybody?" he asked, when Mr. Baxter had left us and gone below. "There are a lot of names on the passenger list, and yet I see nobody about!"

"They are all in bed," I answered. "It is getting late, you see, and, if I am not mistaken, we shall be under way in a few minutes."

"Then, I think, if you'll excuse me for a few moments, I'll go below to my cabin. I expect Mr. Baxter will be wondering where I am."

When he had left me I turned to the bulwarks and stood looking across the water at the gleaming lights ashore. One by

one the boats alongside pushed off, and from the sounds that came from for'ard, I gathered that the anchor was being got aboard. Five minutes later we had swung round to our course and were facing for the open sea. For the first mile or so my thoughts chased each other in rapid succession. You must remember that it was in Naples I had learnt that my darling loved me, and it was in Naples now that I was bidding good-bye to Europe and to all the strange events that had befallen me there. I leant upon the rail, looked at the fast receding country in our wake, at old Vesuvius, fire-capped, away to port, at the Great Bear swinging in the heavens to the nor'ard, and then thought of the Southern Cross which, before many weeks were passed, would be lifting its head above our bows to welcome me back to the sunny land and to the girl I loved so well. Somehow I felt glad that the trip to England was over, and that I was on my way home at last.

The steamer ploughed her almost silent course, and three-quarters of an hour later we were abreast of Capri. As I was looking at it, Lord Beckenham came down the deck and stood beside me. His first speech told me that he was still under the influence of his excitement; indeed, he spoke in rapturous terms of the enjoyment he expected to derive from his tour.

"Are you sure you will be a good sailor?" I asked.

"Oh, I have no fear of that," he answered confidently. "As you know, I have been out in my boat in some pretty rough weather and never felt in the least ill, so I don't think it is likely that I shall begin to be a bad sailor on a vessel the size of the *Saratoga*. By the way, when are we due to reach Port Said?"

"Next Thursday afternoon, I believe, if all goes well."

"Will you let me go ashore with you if you go? I don't want to bother you, but after all you have told me about the place, I should like to see it in your company."

"I'll take you with pleasure," I answered, "provided Mr. Baxter gives his consent. I suppose we must regard him as skipper."

"Oh, I don't think we need fear his refusing. He is very good-natured, you know, and lets me have my own way a good deal."

"Where is he now?"

"Down below, asleep. He has had a lot of running about to-day, and thought he would turn in before we got under way. I think I had better be going now. Good-night."

"Good-night," I answered, and he left me again.

When I was alone I returned to my thoughts of Phyllis and the future, and as soon as my pipe was finished, went below to my bunk. My berth mate I had discovered earlier in the evening was a portly English merchant of the old school, who was visiting his agents in Australia; and, from the violence of his snores, I should judge had not much trouble on his mind. Fortunately mine was the lower bunk, and, when I had undressed, I turned into it to sleep like a top until roused by the bath-room steward at half-past seven next morning. After a good bathe I went back to my cabin and set to work to dress. My companion by this time was awake, but evidently not much inclined for conversation. His usual jovial face, it struck me, was not as rosy as when I had made his acquaintance the night before, and I judged that his good spirits were more than half assumed.

All this time a smart sea was running, and, I must own, the *Saratoga* was rolling abominably.

"A very good morning to you, my dear sir," my cabin mate said, with an air of enjoyment his pallid face belied, as I entered the berth. "Pray how do you feel to-day?"

"In first-class form, and as hungry as a hunter."

He laid himself back on his pillow with a remark that sounded very much like "Oh dear," and thereafter I was suffered to shave and complete my toilet in silence. Having done so I put on my cap and went on deck.

It was indeed a glorious morning; bright sunshine streamed upon the decks, the sea was a perfect blue, and so clear was the air that, miles distant though it was from us, the Italian coast-line could be plainly discerned above the port bulwarks. By this time I had cross-examined the chief steward, and satisfied myself that Nikola was not aboard. His absence puzzled me considerably. Was it possible that I could have been mistaken in the whole affair, and that Baxter's motives were honest after all? But in that case why had Nikola drugged me? And why had he warned me against sailing in the *Saratoga*? The better to think it out I set myself for a vigorous tramp round the hurricane deck, and was still revolving the matter in my mind, when, on turning the corner by the smoking-room entrance, I found myself face to face with Baxter

himself. As soon as he saw me, he came smiling towards me, holding out his hand.

"Good-morning, Mr. Hatteras," he said briskly; "what a delightful morning it is, to be sure. You cannot tell how much I am enjoying it. The sea air seems to have made a new man of me already."

"I am glad to hear it. And pray how is your charge?" I asked, more puzzled than ever by this display of affability.

"Not at all well, I am sorry to say."

"Not well? You don't surely mean to say that he is sea-sick?"

"I'm sorry to say I do. He was perfectly well until he got out of his bunk half an hour ago. Then a sudden, but violent, fit of nausea seized him, and drove him back to bed again."

"I am very sorry to hear it, I hope he will be better soon. He would have been one of the last men I should have expected to be bowled over. Are you coming for a turn round?"

"I shall feel honoured," he answered, and thereupon we set off, step for step, for a constitutional round the deck. By the time we had finished it was nine o'clock, and the saloon gong had sounded for breakfast.

The meal over, I repaired to the Marquis's cabin, and having knocked, was bidden enter. I found my lord in bed, retching violently; his complexion was the colour of zinc, his hands were cold and clammy, and after every spasm his face streamed with perspiration.

"I am indeed sorry to see you like this," I said, bending over him. "How do you feel now?"

"Very bad, indeed!" he answered, with a groan. "I cannot understand it at all. Before I got out of bed this morning I felt as well as possible. Then Mr. Baxter was kind enough to bring me a cup of coffee, and within five minutes of drinking it, I was obliged to go back to bed feeling hopelessly sick and miserable."

"Well, you must try and get round as soon as you can, and come on deck; there's a splendid breeze blowing, and you'll find that will clear the sickness out of you before you know where you are."

But his only reply was another awful fit of sickness, that made as if it would tear his chest asunder. While he was under the influence of it, his tutor entered, and set about ministering to him with a care and fatherly tenderness that even deceived me. I can see things more plainly now, on looking back at them, than I could then, but I must own that Baxter's behaviour towards the boy that morning was of a kind that would have hoodwinked the very Master of All Lies himself. I could easily understand now how this man had come to have such an influence over the kindly-natured Duke of Glenbarth, who, when all was said and done, could have had but small experience of men of Baxter's type.

Seeing that, instead of helping, I was only in the way, I expressed a hope that the patient would soon be himself again, and returned to the deck.

Luncheon came, and still Lord Beckenham was unable to leave his berth. In the evening he was no better. The following morning he was, if anything, stronger; but towards mid-day, just as he was thinking of getting up, his nausea returned upon him, and he was obliged to postpone the attempt. On Wednesday there was no improvement, and, indeed, it was not until Thursday afternoon, when the low-lying coast of Port Said was showing above the sea-line, that he felt in any way fit to leave his bunk. In all my experience of sea-sickness I had never known a more extraordinary case.

It was almost dark before we dropped our anchor off the town, and as soon as we were at a standstill I went below to my friend's cabin. He was sitting on the locker fully dressed.

"Port Said," I announced. "Now, how do you feel about going ashore? Personally, I don't think you had better try it."

"Oh! but I want to go. I have been looking forward to it so much. I am much stronger than I was, believe me, and Mr. Baxter doesn't think it could possibly hurt me."

"If you don't tire yourself too much," that gentleman put in.

"Very well, then," I said. "In that case I'm your man. There are plenty of boats alongside, so we'll have no difficulty about getting there. Won't you come, too, Mr. Baxter?"

"I think not, thank you," he answered. "Port Said is not a place of which I am very fond."

"In that case I think we had better be going," I said, turning to his lordship.

We made our way on deck, and, after a little chaffering, secured a boat, in which we were pulled ashore. Having arrived there, we were immediately beset by the usual crowd of beggars and donkey boys, but, withstanding their importunities, we turned into the Rue de Commerce and made our way inland. To my companion the crowded streets, the

diversity of nationalities and costume, and the strange variety of shops and wares, were matters of absorbing interest. This will be the better understood when it is remembered that, poor though Port Said is in orientalism, it was nevertheless the first Eastern port he had encountered. We had both a few purchases to make, and this business satisfactorily accomplished, we started off to see the sights.

Passing out of the Rue de Commerce, our attention was attracted by a lame young beggar who, leaning on his crutches, blocked our way while he recited his dismal catalogue of woes. Our guide bade him be off, and indeed I was not sorry to be rid of him, but I could see, by glancing at his face, that my companion had taken his case more seriously. In fact, we had not proceeded more than twenty yards before he asked me to wait a moment for him, and taking to his heels ran back to the spot where we had left him. When he rejoined us I said:—"You don't mean to say that you gave that rascal money?"

"Only half a sovereign," he answered. "Perhaps you didn't hear the pitiful story he told us? His father is dead, and now, if it were not for his begging, his mother and five young sisters would all be starving."

I asked our guide if he knew the man, and whether his tale were true.

"No, monsieur," he replied promptly, "it is all one big lie. His father is in the jail, and, if she had her rights, his mother would be there too."

Not another word was said on the subject, but I could see that the boy's generous heart had been hurt. How little he guessed the effect that outburst of generosity was to have upon us later on!

At our guide's suggestion, we passed from the commercial, through the European quarter, to a large mosque situated in Arab Town. It was a long walk, but we were promised that we should see something there that would amply compensate us for any trouble we might be put to to reach it. This turned out to be the case, but hardly in the fashion he had predicted.

The mosque was certainly a fine building, and at the time of our visit was thronged with worshippers. They knelt in two long lines, reaching from end to end, their feet were bare, and their heads turned towards the east. By our guide's instructions we removed our boots at the entrance, but fortunately took the precaution of carrying them into the building with us. From the main hall we passed into a smaller one, where a number of Egyptian standards, relics of the war of '82, were unrolled for our inspection. While we were examining them, our guide, who had for a moment left us, returned with a scared face to inform us that there were a number of English tourists in the mosque who had refused to take their boots off, and were evidently bent on making trouble. As he spoke the ominous hum of angry voices drifted in to us, increasing in volume as we listened. Our guide pricked up his ears and looked anxiously at the door.

"There will be trouble directly," he said solemnly, "if those young men do not behave themselves. If messieurs will be guided by me, they will be going. I can show them a backway out."

For a moment I felt inclined to follow his advice, but Beckenham's next speech decided me to stay.

"You will not go away and leave those stupid fellows to be killed?" he said, moving towards the door into the mosque proper. "However foolish they may have been, they are still our countrymen, and whatever happens we ought to stand by them."

"If you think so, of course we will, but remember it may cost us our lives. You still want to stay? Very good, then, come along, but stick close to me."

We left the small ante-room, in which we had been examining the flags, and passed back into the main hall. Here an extraordinary scene presented itself.

In the furthest corner, completely hemmed in by a crowd of furious Arabs, were three young Englishmen, whose faces plainly showed how well they understood the dangerous position into which their own impudence and folly had enticed them.

Elbowing our way through the crowd, we reached their side, and immediately called upon them to push their way towards the big doors; but before this man[oe]uvre could be executed, some one had given an order in Arabic, and we were all borne back against the wall.

"There is no help for it!" I cried to the biggest of the strangers. "We must fight our way out. Choose your men and come along."

So saying, I gave the man nearest me one under the jaw to remember me by, which laid him on his back, and then, having room to use my arms, sent down another to keep him company. All this time my companions were not idle, and to

my surprise I saw the young Marquis laying about him with a science that I had to own afterwards did credit to his education. Our assailants evidently did not expect to meet with this resistance, for they gave way and began to back towards the door. One or two of them drew knives, but the space was too cramped for them to do much harm with them.

“One more rush,” I cried, “and we’ll turn them out.”

We made the rush, and next moment the doors were closed and barred on the last of them. This done, we paused to consider our position. True we had driven the enemy from the citadel, but then, unless we could find a means of escape, we ourselves were equally prisoners in it. What was to be done?

Leaving three of our party to guard the doors, the remainder searched the adjoining rooms for a means of escape; but though we were unsuccessful in our attempt to find an exit, we did what was the next best thing to do, discovered our cowardly guide in a corner, skulking in a curious sort of cupboard.

By the time we had proved to him that the enemy were really driven out, and that we had possession of the mosque, he recovered his wits a little, and managed, after hearing our promise to throw him to the mob outside unless he discovered a means of escape for us, to cudgel his brains and announce that he knew of one.

No sooner did we hear this, than we resolved to profit by it. The mob outside was growing every moment more impatient, and from the clang of steel-shod rifle butts on the stone steps we came to the conclusion that the services of a force of soldiery had been called in. The situation was critical, and twice imperious demands were made upon us to open the door. But, as may be supposed, this we did not feel inclined to do.

“Now, for your way out,” I said, taking our trembling guide, whose face seemed to blanch whiter and whiter with every knock upon the door, by the shoulders, and giving him a preliminary shake. “Mind what you’re about, and remember, if you lead us into any trap, I’ll wring your miserable neck, assure as you’re alive. Go ahead.”

Collecting our boots and shoes, which, throughout the tumult, had been lying scattered about upon the floor, we passed into the ante-room, and put them on. Then creeping softly out by another door, we reached a small courtyard in the rear, surrounded on all sides by high walls. Our way, so our guide informed us, lay over one of these. But how we were to surmount them was a puzzle, for the lowest scaling place was at least twelve feet high. However, the business had to be done, and, what was more to the point, done quickly.

Calling the strongest of the tourists, who were by this time all quite sober, to my side, I bade him stoop down as if he were playing leap-frog; then, mounting his back myself, I stood upright, and stretched my arms above my head. To my delight my fingers reached to within a few inches of the top of the wall.

“Stand as steady as you can,” I whispered, “for I’m going to jump.”

I did so, and clutched the edge. When I had pulled myself to the top I was so completely exhausted as to be unable to do anything for more than a minute. Then I whispered to another man to climb upon the first man’s back, and stretch his hands up to mine. He did so, and I pulled him up beside me. The guide came next, then the other tourist, then Lord Beckenham. After which I took off and lowered my coat to the man who had stood for us all, and having done so, took a firm grip of the wall with my legs, and dragged him up as I had done the others. It had been a longer business than I liked, and every moment, while we were about it, I expected to hear the cries of the mob inside the mosque, and to find them pouring into the yard to prevent our escape. The bolts on the door, however, must have possessed greater strength than we gave them credit for. At any rate, they did not give way.

When we were all safely on the wall, I asked the guide in which direction we should now proceed; he pointed to the adjoining roofs, and in Indian file, and with the stealthiness of cats, we accordingly crept across them.

The third house surmounted, we found ourselves overlooking a narrow alley, into which we first peered carefully, and, having discovered that no one was about, eventually dropped.

“Now,” said the guide, as soon as we were down, “we must run along here, and turn to the left.”

We did so, to find ourselves in a broader street, which eventually brought us out into the thoroughfare through which we had passed to reach the mosque.

Having got our bearings now, we headed for the harbour, or at least for that part of the town with which I was best acquainted, as fast as our legs would carry us. But, startling as they had been, we had not yet done with adventures for the night.

Once in the security of the gaslit streets, we said good-bye to the men who had got us into all the trouble, and having come to terms with our guide, packed him off and proceeded upon our way alone.

Five minutes later the streaming lights of an open doorway brought us to a standstill, and one glance told us we were looking into the Casino. The noise of the roulette tables greeted our ears, and as we had still plenty of time, and my companion was not tired, I thought it a good opportunity to show him another phase of the seamy side of life.

But before I say anything about that I must chronicle a curious circumstance. As we were entering the building, something made me look round. To my intense astonishment I saw, or believed I saw, Dr. Nikola standing in the street, regarding me. Bidding my companion remain where he was for a moment, I dashed out again and ran towards the place where I had seen the figure. But I was too late. If it were Dr. Nikola, he had vanished as suddenly as he had come. I hunted here, there, and everywhere, in doorways, under verandahs, and down lanes, but it was no use, not a trace of him could I discover. So abandoning my search, I returned to the Casino. Beckenham was waiting for me, and together we entered the building.

The room was packed, and consequently all the tables were crowded, but as we did not intend playing, this was a matter of small concern to us. We were more interested in the players than the game. And, indeed, the expressions on the faces around us were extraordinary. The effect on the young man by my side was peculiar. He looked from face to face, as if he were observing the peculiarities of some strange animals. I watched him, and then I saw his expression suddenly change.

Following the direction of his eyes, I observed a young man putting down his stake upon the board. His face was hidden from me, but by taking a step to the right I could command it. It was none other than the young cripple who had represented his parents to be in such poverty-stricken circumstances; the same young man whom Beckenham had assisted so generously only two hours before. As we looked, he staked his last coin, and that being lost, turned to leave the building. To do this, it was necessary that he should pass close by where we stood. Then his eyes met those of his benefactor, and with a look of what might almost have been shame upon his face, he slunk down the steps and from the building.

"Come, let us get out of this place," cried my companion impatiently, "I believe I should go mad if I stayed here long."

Thereupon we passed out into the street, and without further ado proceeded in the direction in which I imagined the *Saratoga* to lie. A youth requested, in broken English, to be permitted the honour of piloting us, but feeling confident of being able to find my way I declined his services. For fully a quarter of an hour we plodded on, until I began to wonder why the harbour did not heave in sight. It was a queer part of the town we found ourselves in; the houses were perceptibly meaner and the streets narrower. At last I felt bound to confess that I was out of my reckoning, and did not know where we were.

"What are we to do?" asked my lord, looking at his watch. "It's twenty minutes to eleven, and I promised Mr. Baxter I would not be later than the hour."

"What an idiot I was not to take that guide!"

The words were hardly out of my mouth before that personage appeared round the corner and came towards us. I hailed his coming with too much delight to notice the expression of malignant satisfaction on his face, and gave him the name of the vessel we desired to find. He appeared to understand, and the next moment we were marching off in an exactly contrary direction.

We must have walked for at least ten minutes without speaking a word.

From one small and dirty street we turned into another and broader one. By this time not a soul was to be seen, only a vagrant dog or two lying asleep in the road. In this portion of the town gas lamps were at a discount, consequently more than half the streets lay in deep shadow. Our guide walked ahead, we followed half-a-dozen paces or so behind him. I remember noticing a Greek cognomen upon a sign board, and recalling a similar name in Thursday Island, when something very much resembling a thin cord touched my nose and fell over my chin. Before I could put my hand up to it it had begun to tighten round my throat. Just at the same moment I heard my companion utter a sharp cry, and after that I remember no more.



CHAPTER 8

OUR IMPRISONMENT AND ATTEMPT AT ESCAPE

For what length of time I lay unconscious after hearing Beckenham's cry, and feeling the cord tighten round my throat, as narrated in the preceding chapter, I have not the remotest idea; I only know that when my senses returned to me again I found myself in complete darkness. The cord was gone from my neck, it is true, but something was still encircling it in a highly unpleasant fashion. On putting my hand up to it, to my intense astonishment, I discovered it to be a collar of iron, padlocked at the side, and communicating with a wall at the back by means of a stout chain fixed in a ring, which again was attached to a swivel.

This ominous discovery set me hunting about to find out where I was, and for a clue as to what these things might mean. That I was in a room was evident from the fact that, by putting my hands behind me, I could touch two walls forming a corner. But in what part of the town such room might be was beyond my telling. One thing was evident, however, the walls were of brick, unplastered and quite innocent of paper.

As not a ray of light relieved the darkness I put my hand into my ticket pocket, where I was accustomed to carry matches, and finding that my captors had not deprived me of them, lit one and looked about me. It was a dismal scene that little gleam illumined. The room in which I was confined was a small one, being only about ten feet long by eight wide, while, if I had been able to stand upright, I might have raised my hand to within two or three inches of the ceiling. In the furthest left-hand corner was a door, while in the wall on the right, but hopelessly beyond my reach, was a low window almost completely boarded up. I had no opportunity of seeing more, for by the time I had realized these facts the match had burnt down to my fingers. I blew it out and hastened to light another.

Just as I did so a low moan reached my ear. It came from the further end of the room. Again I held the match aloft; this time to discover a huddled-up figure in the corner opposite the door. One glance at it told me that it was none other than my young friend the Marquis of Beckenham. He was evidently still unconscious, for though I called him twice by name, he did not answer, but continued in the same position, moaning softly as before. I had only time for a hurried glance at him before my last match burned down to my fingers, and had to be extinguished. With the departure of the light a return of faintness seized me, and I fell back into my corner, if not quite insensible, certainly unconscious of the immediate awkwardness of our position.

It was daylight when my power of thinking returned to me, and long shafts of sunshine were percolating into us through the chinks in the boards upon the window. To my dismay the room looked even smaller and dingier than when I had examined it by the light of my match some hours before. The young Marquis lay unconscious in his corner just as I had last seen him, but with the widening light I discovered that his curious posture was due more to extraneous circumstances than to his own weakness, for I could see that he was fastened to the wall by a similar collar to my own.

I took out my watch, which had not been taken from me as I might have expected, and examined the dial. It wanted five minutes of six o'clock. So putting it back into my pocket, I set myself for the second time to try and discover where we were. By reason of my position and the chain that bound me, this could only be done by listening, so I shut my eyes and put all my being into my ears. For some moments no sound rewarded my attention. Then a cock in a neighbouring yard on my right crowed lustily, a dog on my left barked, and a moment later I heard the faint sound of some one coming along the street. The pedestrian, whoever he might be, was approaching from the right hand, and, what was still more important, my trained ear informed me that he was lame of one leg, and walked with crutches. Closer and closer he came. But to my surprise he did not pass the window; indeed, I noticed that when he came level with it the sound was completely lost to me. This told me two things: one, that the window, which was boarded up, did not look into the main thoroughfare; the other, that the street itself ran along on the far side of the very wall to which my chain was attached.

As I arrived at the knowledge of this fact, Beckenham opened his eyes; he sat up as well as his chain would permit, and gazed about him in a dazed fashion. Then his right hand went up to the iron collar enclosing his neck, and when he had realized what it meant he appeared even more mystified than before. He seemed to doze again for a minute or so, then his

eyes opened, and as they did so they fell upon me, and his perplexity found relief in words.

"Mr. Hatteras," he said, in a voice like that of a man talking in his sleep, "where are we and what on earth does this chain mean?"

"You ask me something that I want to know myself," I answered. "I cannot tell you where we are, except that we are in Port Said. But if you want to know what I think it means, well, I think it means treachery. How do you feel now?"

"Very sick indeed, and my head aches horribly. But I can't understand it at all. What do you mean by saying that it is treachery?"

This was the one question of all others I had been dreading, for I could not help feeling that when all was said and done I was bitterly to blame. However, unpleasant or not, the explanation had to be got through, and without delay.

"Lord Beckenham," I began, sitting upright and clasping my hands round my knees, "this is a pretty bad business for me. I haven't the reputation of being a coward, but I'll own I feel pretty rocky and mean when I see you sitting there on the floor with that iron collar round your neck and that chain holding you to the wall, and know that it's, in a measure, all my stupid, blundering folly that has brought it about."

"Oh, don't say that, Mr. Hatteras!" was the young man's generous reply. "For whatever or whoever may be to blame for it, I'm sure you're not."

"That's because you don't know everything, my lord. Wait till you have heard what I have to tell you before you give me such complete absolution."

"I'm not going to blame you whatever you may tell me; but please go on!"

There and then I set to work and told him all that had happened to me since my arrival in London; informed him of my meeting with Nikola, of Wetherell's hasty departure for Australia, of my distrust for Baxter, described the telegram incident and Baxter's curious behaviour afterwards, narrated my subsequent meeting with the two men in the *Green Sailor Hotel*, described my journey to Plymouth, and finished with the catastrophe that had happened to me there.

"Now you see," I said in conclusion, "why I regard myself as being so much to blame."

"Excuse me," he answered, "but I cannot say that I see it in the same light at all."

"I'm afraid I must be more explicit then. In the first place you must understand that, without a shadow of a doubt, Baxter was chosen for your tutor by Nikola, whose agent he undoubtedly is, for a specific purpose. Now what do you think that purpose was? You don't know? To induce your father to let you travel, to be sure. You ask why they should want you to travel? We'll come to that directly. Their plan is succeeding admirably, when I come upon the scene and, like the great blundering idiot I am, must needs set to work unconsciously to assist them in their nefarious designs. Your father eventually consents, and it is arranged that you shall set off for Australia at once. Then it is discovered that I am going to leave in the same boat. This does not suit Nikola's plans at all, so he determines to prevent my sailing with you. By a happy chance he is unsuccessful, and I follow and join the boat in Naples. Good gracious! I see something else now."

"What is that?"

"Simply this. I could not help thinking at the time that your bout of sea-sickness between Naples and this infernal place was extraordinary. Well, if I'm not very much mistaken, *you were physicked, and it was Baxter's doing.*"

"But why?"

"Ah! That's yet to be discovered. But you may bet your bottom dollar it was some part of their devilish conspiracy. I'm as certain of that as that we are here now. Now here's another point. Do you remember my running out of the Casino last night? Well, that was because I saw Nikola standing in the roadway."

"Are you certain? How could he have got here? And what could his reasons be for watching us?"

"Why, can't you see? To find out how his plot is succeeding, to be sure."

"And that brings us back to our original question — what is that plot?"

"That's rather more difficult to answer! But if you ask my candid opinion I should say nothing more nor less than to make you prisoner and blackmail your father for a ransom."

For some few minutes neither of us spoke. The outlook seemed too hopeless for words, and the Marquis was still too weak to keep up an animated conversation for any length of time. He sat leaning his head on his hand. But presently he looked up again. "My poor father!" he said. "What a state he will be in!"

"And what worries me more," I answered, "is how he will regret ever having listened to my advice. What a dolt I was not to have told him of my suspicions."

"You must not blame yourself for that. I am sure my father would hold you as innocent as I do. Now let us consider our position. In the first place, where are we, do you think? In the second, is there any possible chance of escape?"

"To the first my answer is, 'don't know'; to the second, 'can't say.' I have discovered one thing, however, and that is that the street does not lie outside that window, but runs along on the other side of this wall behind me. The window, I suspect, looks out on to some sort of a courtyard. But unfortunately that information is not much use to us, as we can neither of us move away from where we are placed."

"Is there no other way?"

"Not one, as far as I can tell. Can you see anything on your side?"

"Nothing at all, unless we could get at the door. But what's that sticking out of the wall near your feet?"

To get a better view of it I stooped as much as I was able. "It looks like a pipe."

The end of a pipe it certainly was, and sticking out into the room, but where it led to, and why it had been cut off in this peculiar fashion, were two questions I could no more answer than I could fly.

"Does it run out into the street, do you think?" was Beckenham's immediate query. "If so, you might manage to call through it to some passer-by, and ask him to obtain assistance for us!"

"A splendid notion if I could get my mouth anywhere within a foot of it, but as this chain will not permit me to do that, it might as well be a hundred miles off. It's as much as I can do to touch it with my fingers."

"Do you think if you had a stick you could push a piece of paper through? We might write a message."

"Possibly, but there's another drawback to that. I haven't the necessary piece of stick."

"Here is a stiff piece of straw; try that."

He harpooned a piece of straw, about eight inches long, across the room towards me, and, when I had received it, I thrust it carefully into the pipe. A disappointment, however, was in store for us.

"It's no use," I reported sorrowfully, as I threw the straw away. "It has an elbow half-way down, and that would prevent any message from being pushed through."

"Then we must try to discover some other plan. Don't lose heart!"

"Hush! I hear somebody coming."

True enough a heavy footfall was approaching down the passage. It stopped at the door of the room in which we were confined, and a key was inserted in the lock. Next moment the door swung open and a tall man entered the room. A ray of sunlight, penetrating between the boards that covered the window, fell upon him, and showed us that his hair was white and that his face was deeply pitted with smallpox marks. Now, where had I met or heard of a man with those two peculiarities before? Ah! I remembered!

He stood for a moment in the doorway looking about him, and then strolled into the centre of the room.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said, with an airy condescension that stung like an insult; "I trust you have no fault to find with the lodging our poor hospitality is able to afford you."

"Mr. Prendergast," I answered, determined to try him with the name of the man mentioned by my sweetheart in her letter. "What does this mean? Why have we been made prisoners like this? I demand to be released at once. You will have to answer to our consul for this detention."

For a brief space he appeared to be dumbfounded by my knowledge of his name. But he soon recovered himself and leaned his back against the wall, looking us both carefully over before he answered.

"I shall be only too pleased," he said sneeringly, "but if you'll allow me to say so, I don't think we need trouble about explanations yet awhile."

"Pray, what do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I say; as you are likely to be our guests for some considerable time to come, there will be no need for explanation."

"You mean to keep us prisoners, then, do you? Very well, Mr. Prendergast, be assured of this, when I *do* get loose I'll

make you feel the weight of my arm.”

“I think it’s very probable there will be a fight if ever we do meet,” he answered, coolly taking a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it. “And it’s my impression you’d be a man worth fighting, Mr. Hatteras.”

“If you think my father will let me remain here very long you’re much mistaken,” said Beckenham. “And as for the ransom you expect him to pay, I don’t somehow fancy you’ll get a halfpenny.”

At the mention of the word “ransom” I noticed that a new and queer expression came into our captor’s face. He did not reply, however, except to utter his usual irritating laugh. Having done so he went to the door and called something in Arabic. In answer a gigantic negro made his appearance, bearing in his hands a tray on which were set two basins of food and two large mugs of water. These were placed before us, and Prendergast bade us, if we were hungry, fall to.

“You must not imagine that we wish to starve you,” he said. “Food will be served to you twice a day. And if you want it, you can even be supplied with spirits and tobacco. Now, before I go, one word of advice. Don’t indulge in any idea of escape. Communication with the outside world is absolutely impossible, and you will find that those collars and chains will stand a good strain before they will give way. If you behave yourselves you will be well looked after; but if you attempt any larks you will be confined in different rooms, and there will be a radical change in our behaviour.”

So saying he left the room, taking the precaution to lock the door carefully behind him.

When we were once more alone, a long silence fell upon us. It would be idle for me to say that the generous behaviour of the young Marquis with regard to my share in this wretched business had set my mind at rest. But if it had not done that it had at least served to intensify another resolution. Come what might, I told myself, I would find a way of escape, and he should be returned to his father safe and sound, if it cost me my life to do it. But how *were*, we to escape? We could not move from our places on account of the chains that secured us to the walls, and, though I put all my whole strength into it, I found I could not dislodge the staple a hundredth part of an inch from its holding-place.

The morning wore slowly on, mid-day came and went, the afternoon dragged its dismal length, and still there was no change in our position. Towards sundown the same gigantic negro entered the room again, bringing us our evening meal. When he left we were locked up for the night, with only the contemplation of our woes, and the companionship of the multitudes of mice that scampered about the floor, to enliven us.

The events of the next seven days are hardly worth chronicling, unless it is to state that every morning at daylight the same cock crew and the same dog barked, while at six o’clock the same cripple invariably made his way down the street behind me. At eight o’clock almost to the minute, breakfast was served to us, and, just as punctually, the evening meal made its appearance as the sun was declining behind the opposite house-top. Not again did we see any sign of Mr. Prendergast, and though times out of number I tugged at my chain I was never a whit nearer loosening it than I had been on the first occasion. One after another plans of escape were proposed, discussed, and invariably rejected as impracticable. So another week passed and another, until we had been imprisoned in that loathsome place not less than twenty days. By the end of that time, as may be supposed, we were as desperate as men could well be. I must, however, admit that anything like the patience and pluck of my companion under such circumstances I had never in my life met with before.

One fact had repeatedly struck me as significant, and that was the circumstance that every morning between six and half-past, as already narrated, the same cripple went down the street; and in connexion with this, within the last few days of the time, a curious coincidence had revealed itself to me. From the tapping of his crutches on the stones I discovered that while one was shod with iron, the other was not. Now where and when had I noticed that peculiarity in a cripple before? That I had observed it somewhere I felt certain. For nearly half the day I turned this over and over in my mind, and then, in the middle of our evening meal, enlightenment came to me. I remembered the man whose piteous tale had so much affected Beckenham on the day of our arrival, and the sound his crutches made upon the pavement as he left us. If my surmise proved correct, and we could only manage to communicate with him, here was a golden opportunity. But how were we to do this? We discussed it, and discussed it, times out of number, but in vain. That he must be stopped on his way down the street need not to be argued at all. In what way, however, could this be done? The window was out of the question, the door was not to be thought of; in that case the only communicating place would be the small pipe by my side. But as I have already pointed out, by reason of the elbow it would be clearly impossible to force a message through it. All day we devoted ourselves to attempts to solve what seemed a hopeless difficulty. Then like a flash a brilliant inspiration burst upon me.

“By Jove, I have it!” I said, taking care to whisper lest any one might be listening at the door. “We must manage by hook or crook to catch a mouse *and let him carry our appeal for help to the outside world.*”

“A magnificent idea! If we can catch one I do believe you’ve saved us!”

But to catch a mouse was easier said than done. Though the room was alive with them they were so nimble and so cunning, that, try how we would, we could not lay hold of one. But at length my efforts were rewarded, and after a little struggle I held my precious captive in my hand. By this time another idea had come to me. If we wanted to bring Nikola and his gang to justice, and to discover their reason for hatching this plot against us, it would not do to ask the public at large for help — and I must own, in spite of our long imprisonment, I was weak enough to feel a curiosity as to their motive. No! It must be to the beggar who passed the house every morning that we must appeal.

“This letter concerns you more than me,” I said to my fellow-prisoner. “Have you a lead pencil in your pocket?”

He had, and immediately threw it across to me. Then, taking a small piece of paper from my pocket, I set myself to compose the following in French and English, assisted by my companion:—

“If this should meet the eye of the individual to whom a young Englishman gave half a sovereign in charity three weeks ago, he is implored to assist one who assisted him, and who has been imprisoned ever since that day in the room with the blank wall facing the street and the boarded-up window on the right-hand side. To do this he must obtain a small file and discover a way to convey it into the room by means of the small pipe leading through the blank wall into the street; perhaps if this could be dislodged it might be pushed in through the aperture thus made. On receipt of the file an English five-pound note will be conveyed to him in the same way as this letter, and another if secrecy is observed and those in the house escape.”

This important epistle had hardly been concocted before the door was unlocked and our dusky servitor entered with the evening meal. He had long since abandoned his first habit of bringing us our food in separate receptacles, but conveyed it to us now in the saucepan in which it was cooked, dividing it thence into our basins. These latter, it may be interesting to state, had not been washed since our arrival.

All the time that our jailer was in the room I held my trembling prisoner in my hand, clinging to him as to the one thing which connected us with liberty. But the door had no sooner closed upon him than I had tilted out my food upon the floor and converted my basin into a trap.

It may be guessed how long that night seemed to us, and with what trembling eagerness we awaited the first signs of breaking day. Directly it was light I took off and unravelled one of my socks. The thread thus obtained I doubled, and having done this, secured one end of it to the note, which I had rolled into a small compass, attaching the other to my captive mouse’s hind leg. Then we set ourselves to wait for six o’clock. The hour came; and minute after minute went by before we heard in the distance the tapping of the crutches on the stones. Little by little the sound grew louder, and then fainter, and when I judged he was nearly at my back, I stooped and thrust our curious messenger into the pipe. Then we sat down to await the result.

As the mouse, only too glad to escape, ran into the aperture, the thread, on which our very lives depended, swiftly followed, dragging its message after it. Minutes went by; half an hour; an hour; and then the remainder of the day; and still nothing came to tell us that our appeal had been successful.

That night I caught another mouse, wrote the letter again, and at six o’clock next morning once more despatched it on its journey. Another day went by without reply. That night we caught another, and at six-o’clock next morning sent it off; a third, and even a fourth, followed, but still without success. By this time the mice were almost impossible to catch, but our wits were sharpened by despair, and we managed to hit upon a method that eventually secured for us a plentiful supply. For the sixth time the letter was written and despatched at the moment the footsteps were coming down the street. Once more the tiny animal crawled into the pipe, and once more the message disappeared upon its journey.

Another day was spent in anxious waiting, but this time we were not destined to be disappointed. About eight o’clock that night, just as we were giving up hope, I detected a faint noise near my feet; it was for all the world as if some one were forcing a stick through a hole in a brick wall. I informed Beckenham of the fact in a whisper, and then put my head down to listen. Yes, there was the sound again. Oh, if only I had a match! But it was no use wishing for what was impossible, so I put my hand down to the pipe. *It was moving!* It turned in my hand, moved to and fro for a brief space and then disappeared from my grasp entirely; next moment it had left the room. A few seconds later something cold was thrust into

my hand, *and from its rough edge I knew it to be a file*. I drew it out as if it were made of gold and thrust it into my pocket. A piece of string was attached to it, and the reason of this I was at first at some loss to account for. But a moment's reflection told me that it was to assist in the fulfilment of our share of the bargain. So, taking a five-pound note from the secret pocket in which I carried my paper money, I tied the string to it, and it was instantly withdrawn. A minute could not have elapsed before I was at work upon the staple of my collar, and in less than half an hour it was filed through and the iron was off my neck.

If I tried for a year I could not make you understand what a relief it was to me to stand upright. I stretched myself again and again, and then crossed the room on tip-toe in the dark to where the Marquis lay.

"You are free," he whispered, clutching and shaking my hand. "Oh, thank God!"

"Hush! Put down your head and let me get to work upon your collar before you say anything more."

As I was able this time to get at my work standing up, it was not very long before Beckenham was as free as I was. He rose to his feet with a great sigh of relief, and we shook hands warmly in the dark.

"Now," I said, leading him towards the door, "we will make our escape, and I pity the man who attempts to stop us."



CHAPTER 9

DR. NIKOLA PERMITS US A FREE PASSAGE

The old saying, “Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched,” is as good a warning as any I know. For if we had not been so completely occupied filing through the staples of our collars we should not have omitted to take into consideration the fact that, even when we should have removed the chains that bound us, we would still be prisoners in the room. I’m very much afraid, however, even had we remembered this point, we should only have considered it of minor importance and one to be easily overcome. As it was, the unwelcome fact remained that the door *was* locked, and, what was worse, that the lock itself had, for security’s sake, been placed on the outside, so that there was no chance of our being able to pick it, even had our accomplishments lain in that direction.

“Try the window,” whispered Beckenham, in answer to the heavy sigh which followed my last discovery.

Accordingly we crossed the room, and I put my hands upon one of the boards and pulled. But I might as well have tried to tow a troopship with a piece of cotton, for all the satisfactory result I got; the planks were trebly screwed to the window frame, and each in turn defied me. When I was tired Beckenham put his strength to it, but even our united efforts were of no avail, and, panting and exhausted, we were at length obliged to give it up as hopeless.

“This is a pretty fix we’ve got ourselves into,” I said as soon as I had recovered sufficient breath to speak. “How on earth are we to escape?”

“I can’t say, unless we manage to burst that door and fight our way out. I wonder if that could be done.”

“First, let’s look at the door.”

We crossed the room again, and I examined the door carefully. It was not a very strong one; but I was sufficient of a carpenter to know that it would withstand a good deal of pressure before it would give way.

“I’ve a good mind to try it,” I said; “but in that case, remember, it will probably mean a hand-to-hand fight on the other side, and, unarmed and weak as we are, we shall be pretty sure to get the worst of it.”

“Never mind that,” my intrepid companion replied, with a confidence in his voice that I was very far from feeling. “In for a penny, in for a pound; even if we’re killed it couldn’t be worse than being buried alive.”

“That’s so, and if fighting’s your idea, I’m your man,” I answered. “Let me first take my bearings, and then I’ll see what I can do against it. You get out of the way, but be sure to stand by to rush the passage directly the door goes.”

Again I felt the door and wall in order that I might be sure where it lay, and having done so crossed the room. My heart was beating like a Nasmyth hammer, and it was nearly a minute before I could pull myself together sufficiently for my rush. Then summoning every muscle in my body to my assistance, I dashed across and at it with all the strength my frame was capable of. Considering the darkness of the room, my steering was not so bad, for my shoulder caught the door just above its centre; there was a great crash — a noise of breaking timbers — and amid a shower of splinters and general *débris* I fell headlong through into the passage. By the time it would have taken me to count five, Beckenham was beside me helping me to rise.

“Now stand by for big trouble!” I said, rubbing my shoulder, and every moment expecting to see a door open and a crowd of Prendergast’s ruffians come rushing out. “We shall have them on us in a minute.”

But to our intense astonishment it was all dead silence. Not a sound of any single kind, save our excited breathing, greeted our ears. We might have broken into an empty house for all we knew the difference.

For nearly five minutes we stood, side by side, waiting for the battle which did not come.

“What on earth does it mean?” I asked my companion. “That crash of mine was loud enough to wake the dead. Can they have deserted the place, think you, and left us to starve?”

“I can’t make it out any more than you can,” he answered. “But don’t you think we’d better take advantage of their not coming to find a way out?”

“Of course. One of us had better creep down the passage and discover how the land lies. As I’m the stronger, I’ll go. You wait here.”

I crept along the passage, treading cautiously as a cat, for I knew that both our lives depended on it. Though it could not have been more than sixty feet, it seemed of interminable length, and was as black as night. Not a glimmer of light, however faint, met my eyes.

On and on I stole, expecting every moment to be pounced upon and seized; but no such fate awaited me. If, however, our jailers did not appear, another danger was in store for me.

In the middle of my walk my feet suddenly went from under me, and I found myself falling I knew not where. In reality it was only a drop of about three feet down a short flight of steps. Such a noise as my fall made, however, was surely never heard, but still no sound came. Then Beckenham fumbled his way cautiously down the steps to my side, and whispered an inquiry as to what had happened. I told him in as few words as possible, and then struggled to my feet again.

Just as I did so my eyes detected a faint glimmer of light low down on the floor ahead of us. From its position it evidently emanated from the doorway of a room.

“Oh! if we only had a match,” I whispered.

“It’s no good wishing,” said Beckenham. “What do you advise?”

“It’s difficult to say,” I answered; “but I should think we’d better listen at that door and try to discover if there is any one inside. If there is, and he is alone, we must steal in upon him, let him see that we are desperate, and, willy-nilly, force him to show us a way out. It’s ten chances to one, if we go on prowling about here, we shall stumble upon the whole nest of them — then we’ll be caught like rats in a trap. What do you think?”

“I agree with you. Go on.”

Without further ado we crept towards the light, which, as I expected, came from under a door, and listened. Some one was plainly moving about inside; but though we waited for what seemed a quarter of an hour, but must in reality have been less than a minute and a half, we could hear no voices.

“Whoever he is, he’s alone — that’s certain,” whispered my companion. “Open the door softly, and we’ll creep in upon him.”

In answer, and little by little, a cold shiver running down my back lest it should creak and so give warning to the person within, I turned the handle, pushed open the door, and we looked inside. Then — but, my gracious! if I live to be a thousand I shall never forget the sight that met my eyes.

The room itself was a long and low one: its measurements possibly sixty feet by fifteen. The roof — for there was no ceiling — was of wood, crossed by heavy rafters, and much begrimed with dirt and smoke. The floor was of some highly polished wood closely resembling oak, and was completely bare. But the shape and construction of the room itself were as nothing compared with the strangeness of its furniture and occupants. Words would fail me if I tried to give you a true and accurate description of it. I only know that, strong man as I was, and used to the horrors of life and death, what I saw before me then made my blood run cold and my flesh creep as it had never done before.

To begin with, round the walls were arranged, at regular intervals, more than a dozen enormous bottles, each of which contained what looked, to me, only too much like human specimens pickled in some light-coloured fluid resembling spirits of wine. Between these gigantic but more than horrible receptacles were numberless smaller ones, holding other and even more dreadful remains; while on pedestals and stands, bolt upright and reclining, were skeletons of men, monkeys, and quite a hundred sorts of animals. The intervening spaces were filled with skulls, bones, and the apparatus for every kind of murder known to the fertile brain of man. There were European rifles, revolvers, bayonets, and swords; Italian stilettos, Turkish scimitars, Greek knives, Central African spears and poisoned arrows, Zulu knobkerries, Afghan yataghans, Malay kris, Sumatra blow-pipes, Chinese dirks, New Guinea head-catching implements, Australian spears and boomerangs, Polynesian stone hatchets, and numerous other weapons the names of which I cannot now remember. Mixed up with them were implements for every sort of wizardry known to the superstitious; from old-fashioned English love charms to African Obi sticks, from spiritualistic planchettes to the most horrible of Fijian death potions.

In the centre of the wall, opposite to where we stood, was a large fireplace of the fashion usually met with in old English manor-houses, and on either side of it a figure that nearly turned me sick with horror. That on the right hand was apparently a native of Northern India, if one might judge by his dress and complexion. He sat on the floor in a constrained

attitude, accounted for by the fact that his head, which was at least three times too big for his body, was so heavy as to require an iron tripod with a ring or collar in the top of it to keep it from overbalancing him and bringing him to the floor. To add to the horror of this awful head, it was quite bald; the skin was drawn tensely over the bones, and upon this veins stood out as large as macaroni stems.

On the other side of the hearth was a creature half-ape and half-man — the like of which I remember once to have seen in a museum of monstrosities in Sydney, where, if my memory serves me, he was described upon the catalogue as a Burmese monkey-boy. He was chained to the wall in somewhat the same fashion as we had been, and was chattering and scratching for all the world like a monkey in a Zoo.

But, horrible as these things were, the greatest surprise of all was yet to come. For, standing at the heavy oaken table in the centre of the room, was a man I should have known anywhere if I had been permitted half a glance at him. *It was Dr. Nikola.*

When we entered he was busily occupied with a scalpel, dissecting an animal strangely resembling a monkey. On the table, and watching the work upon which his master was engaged, sat his constant companion, the same fiendish black cat I have mentioned elsewhere; while at the end nearest us, standing on tip-toe, the better to see what was going on, was an albino dwarf, scarcely more than two feet eight inches high. So stealthily, however, had our approach been made, and so carefully had I opened the door, that we were well into the room before our appearance was discovered, and also before I had realized into whose presence we had stumbled. Then my foot touched a board that creaked, and Dr. Nikola looked up from the work upon which he was engaged.

His pale, thin face did not show the slightest sign of surprise as he said, in his usual placid tone —

“So you have managed to escape from your room, gentlemen. Well, and pray what do you want?”

For a moment I was so much overcome with surprise that my tongue refused to perform its office. Then I said, advancing towards him as I spoke, closely followed by the Marquis —

“So, Dr. Nikola, we have met at last!”

“At last, Mr. Hatteras, as you say,” this singular being replied, still without showing a sign of either interest or embarrassment. “All things considered, I suppose you would deem me ironical if I ventured to say that I am pleased to see you about again. However, don’t let me keep you standing; won’t you sit down? My lord, let me offer you a chair.”

All this time we were edging up alongside the table, and I was making ready for a rush at him. But he was not to be taken off his guard. His extraordinary eyes had been watching me intently, taking in my every movement; and a curious effect they had upon me.

“Dr. Nikola,” I said, “the game is up. You beat me last time; but now you must own I come out on top. Don’t utter a word or call for assistance — if you do you’re a dead man. Now drop that knife you hold in your hand, and show us the way out!”

The Marquis was on his right, I was on his left, and we were close upon him as I spoke. Still he showed no sign of fear, though he must have known the danger of his position. But his eyes glowed in his head like living coals.

You will ask why we did not rush at him? Well, if I am obliged to own it, I must — the truth was, such was the power that emanated from this extraordinary man, that though we both knew the crucial moment of our enterprise had arrived, while his eyes were fixed upon us, neither of us could stir an inch. When he spoke his voice seemed to cut like a knife.

“So you think my game is up, Mr. Hatteras, do you? I’m afraid once more I must differ from you. Look behind you.”

I did so, and that glance showed me how cleverly we’d been trapped. Leaning against the door, watching us with cruel, yet smiling eyes, was our old enemy Prendergast, revolver in hand. Just behind me were two powerful Soudanese, while near the Marquis was a man looking like a Greek — and a very stalwart Greek at that. Observing our discomfiture, Nikola seated himself in a big chair near the fireplace and folded his hands in the curious fashion I have before described; as he did so his black cat sprang to his shoulder and sat there watching us all. Dr. Nikola was the first to speak.

“Mr. Hatteras,” he said, with devilish clearness and deliberation, “you should really know me better by this time than to think you could outwit me so easily. Is my reputation after all so small? And, while I think of it, pray let me have the pleasure of returning to you your five pound note and your letters. Your mice were perfect messengers, were they not?” As he spoke he handed me the selfsame Bank of England note I had despatched through the pipe that very evening in payment for the file; then he shook from a box he had taken from the chimney-piece all the communications I had written

imploping assistance from the outside world. To properly estimate my chagrin and astonishment would be very difficult. I could only sit and stare, first at the money and then at the letters, in blankest amazement. So we had not been rescued by the cripple after all. Was it possible that while we had been so busy arranging our escape we had in reality been all the time under the closest surveillance? If that were so, then this knowledge of our doings would account for the silence with which my attack upon the door had been received. Now we were in an even worse position than before. I looked at Beckenham, but his head was down and his right hand was picking idly at the table edge. He was evidently waiting for what was coming next.

In sheer despair I turned to Nikola. "Since you have outwitted us again, Dr. Nikola, do not play with us — tell us straight out what our fate is to be."

"If it means going back to that room again," said Beckenham, in a voice I hardly recognized, "I would far rather die and be done with it."

"Do not fear, my lord, you shall not die," Nikola said, turning to him with a bow. "Believe me, you will live to enjoy many happier hours than those you have been compelled to spend under my roof!"

"What do you mean?"

The doctor did not answer for nearly a moment; then he took what looked to me suspiciously like a cablegram form from his pocket and carefully examined it. Having done so, he said quietly —

"Gentlemen, you ask what I mean? Well, I mean this — if you wish to leave this house this very minute, you are free to do so on one condition!"

"And that condition is?"

"That you allow yourselves to be blindfolded in this room and conducted by my servants to the harbour side. I must furthermore ask your words of honour that you will not seek to remove your bandages until you are given permission to do so. Do you agree to this?"

Needless to say we both signified our assent.

This free permission to leave the house was a second surprise, and one for which we were totally unprepared.

"Then let it be so. Believe me, my lord Marquis, and you, Mr. Hatteras, it is with the utmost pleasure I restore your liberty to you again!"

He made a sign to Prendergast, who instantly stepped forward. But I had something to say before we were removed.

"One word first, Dr. Nikola. You have —"

"Mr. Hatteras, if you will be guided by me, you will keep a silent tongue in your head. Let well alone. Take warning by the proverb, and beware how you disturb a sleeping dog. Why I have acted as I have done towards you, you may some day learn; in the meantime rest assured it was from no idle motive. Now take me at my word, and go while you have the chance. I may change my mind in a moment, and then —"

He stopped and did not say any more. At a sign, Prendergast clapped a thick bandage over my eyes, while another man did the same for Beckenham; a man on either side of me took my arms, and next moment we had passed out of the room, and before I could have counted fifty were in the cool air of the street.

How long we were walking, after leaving the house, I could not say, but at last our escort called a halt. Prendergast was evidently in command, for he said —

"Gentlemen, before we leave you, you will renew your words of honour not to remove your bandages for five full minutes?"

We complied with his request, and instantly our arms were released; a moment later we heard our captors leaving us. The minutes went slowly by. Presently Beckenham said —

"How long do you think we've been standing here?"

"Nearly the stipulated time, I should fancy," I answered. "However, we'd better give them a little longer, to avoid any chance of mistake."

Again a silence fell on us. Then I tore off my bandage, to find Beckenham doing the same.

"They're gone, and we're free again," he cried. "Hurrah!"

We shook hands warmly on our escape, and having done so looked about us. A ship's bell out in the stream chimed

half an hour after midnight, and a precious dark night it was. A number of vessels were to be seen, and from the noise that came from them it was evident they were busy coaling.

"What's to be done now?" asked Beckenham.

"Find an hotel, I think," I answered; "get a good night's rest, and first thing in the morning hunt up our consul and the steamship authorities."

"Come along, then. Let's look for a place. I noticed one that should suit us close to where we came ashore that day."

Five minutes' walking brought us to the house we sought. The proprietor was not very fastidious, and whatever he may have thought of our appearances he took us in without demur. A bath and a good meal followed, and then after a thorough overhauling of all the details connected with our imprisonment we turned into bed, resolved to thrash it out upon the morrow.

Next morning, true to our arrangement, as soon as breakfast was over, I set off for the steamship company's office, leaving the Marquis behind me at the hotel for reasons which had begun to commend themselves to me, and which will be quite apparent to you.

I found the *Saratoga's* agent hard at work in his private office. He was a tall, thin man, slightly bald, wearing a pair of heavy gold pince-nez, and very slow and deliberate in speech.

"I beg your pardon," he began, when I had taken possession of his proffered chair, "but did I understand my clerk to say that your name was Hatteras?"

"That is my name," I answered. "I was a passenger in the *Saratoga* for Australia three weeks ago, but had the misfortune to be left behind when she sailed."

"Ah! I remember the circumstances thoroughly," he said. "The young Marquis of Beckenham went ashore with you, I think, and came within an ace of being also left behind."

"Within an ace!" I cried; "but he *was* left behind."

"No, no! there you are mistaken," was the astounding reply; "he *would* have been left behind had not his tutor and I gone ashore at the last moment to look for him and found him wandering about on the outskirts of Arab Town. I don't remember ever to have seen a man more angry than the tutor was, and no wonder, for they only just got out to the boat again as the gangway was being hauled aboard."

"Then you mean to tell me that the Marquis went on to Australia after all!" I cried. "And pray how did this interesting young gentleman explain the fact of his losing sight of me?"

"He lost you in a crowd, he said," the agent continued. "It was a most extraordinary business altogether."

It certainly was, and even more extraordinary than he imagined. I could hardly believe my ears. The world seemed to be turned upside down. I was so bewildered that I stumbled out a few lame inquiries about the next boat sailing for Australia, and what would be done with my baggage, and then made my way as best I could out of the office. Hastening back to the hotel, I told my story from beginning to end to my astonished companion, who sat on his bed listening open-mouthed. When I had finished he said feebly — "But what does it all mean? Tell me that! What does it mean?"

"It means," I answered, "that our notion about Nikola's abducting us in order to blackmail your father was altogether wrong, and, if you ask me, I should say not half picturesque enough. No, no! this mystery is a bigger one by a hundred times than even we expected, and there are more men in it than those we have yet seen. It remains with you to say whether you will assist in the attempt to unravel it or not."

"What do you mean by saying it remains with me? Do I understand that you intend following it up?"

"Of course I do. Nikola and Baxter between them have completely done me — now I'm going to do my best to do them. By Jove!"

"What is it now?"

"I see it all as plain as a pikestaff. I understand exactly now why Baxter came for you, why he telegraphed that the train was laid, why I was drugged in Plymouth, why you were sea-sick between Naples and this place, and why we were both kidnapped!"

"Then explain, for mercy's sake!"

"I will. See here. In the first place, remember your father's peculiar education of yourself. If you consider that, you will

see that you are the only young nobleman of high rank whose face is not well known to his brother peers. That being so, Nikola wants to procure you for some purpose of his own in Australia. Your father advertises for a tutor; he sends one of his agents — Baxter — to secure the position. Baxter, at Nikola's instruction, puts into your head a desire for travel. You pester your father for the necessary permission. Just as this is granted I come upon the scene. Baxter suspects me. He telegraphs to Nikola 'The train is laid,' which means that he has begun to sow the seeds of a desire for travel, when a third party steps in — in other words, I am the new danger that has arisen. He arranges your sailing, and all promises to go well. Then Dr. Nikola finds out I intend going in the same boat. He tries to prevent me; and I— by Jove! I see another thing. Why did Baxter suggest that you should cross the Continent and join the boat at Naples? Why, simply because if you had started from Plymouth you would soon have got over your sickness, if you had ever been ill at all, and in that case the passengers would have become thoroughly familiar with your face by the time you reached Port Said. That would never have done, so he takes you to Naples, drugs you next morning — for you must remember you were ill after the coffee he gave you — and by that means kept you ill and confined to your cabin throughout the entire passage to Port Said. Then he persuades you to go ashore with me. You do so, with what result you know. Presently he begins to bewail your non-return, invites the agent to help in the search. They set off, and eventually find you near the Arab quarter. You must remember that neither the agent, the captain, nor the passengers have seen you, save at night, so the substitute, who is certain to have been well chosen and schooled for the part he is to play, is not detected. Then the boat goes on her way, while we are left behind languishing in durance vile."

"What do you advise me to do? Remember, Baxter has letters to the different Governors from my father."

"I know what I should do myself!"

"Go to the consul and get him to warn the authorities in Australia, I suppose?"

"No. That would do little or no good — remember, they've got three weeks' start of us."

"Then what shall we do? I'm in your hands entirely, and whatever you advise I promise you I'll do."

"If I were you I should doff my title, take another name, and set sail with me for Australia. Once there, we'll put up in some quiet place and set ourselves to unmask these rascals and to defeat their little game, whatever it may be. Are you prepared for so much excitement as that?"

"Of course I am. Come what may, I'll go with you, and there's my hand on it."

"Then we'll catch the next boat — not a mail-steamer — that sails for an Australian port, and once ashore there we'll set the ball a-rolling with a vengeance."

"That scoundrel Baxter! I'm not vindictive as a rule, but I feel I should like to punish him."

"Well, if they've not flown by the time we reach Australia, you'll probably be able to gratify your wish. It's Nikola, however, I want."

Beckenham shuddered as I mentioned the Doctor's name. So to change the subject I said — —

"I'm thinking of taking a little walk. Would you care to accompany me?"

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm going to try and find the house where we were shut up," I answered. "I want to be able to locate it for future reference, if necessary."

"Is it safe to go near it, do you think?"

"In broad daylight, yes! But, just to make sure, we'll buy a couple of revolvers on the way. And, what's more, if it becomes necessary, we'll use them."

"Come along, then."

With that we left our hotel and set off in the direction of the Casino, stopping, however, on the way to make the purchases above referred to.

We passed down one thoroughfare and up another, and at last reached the spot where I had commented on the sign-boards, and where we had been garrotted. Surely the house must be near at hand now? But though we hunted high and low, up one street and down another, not a single trace of any building answering the description of the one we wanted could we discover. At last, after nearly an hour's search, we were obliged to give it up, and return to our hotel, unsuccessful.

As we finished lunch a large steamer made her appearance in the harbour, and brought up opposite the town. When

we questioned our landlord, who was an authority on the subject, he informed us that she was the s.s. *Pescadore*, of Hull, bound to Melbourne.

Hearing this we immediately chartered a boat, pulled off to her, and interviewed the captain. As good luck would have it, he had room for a couple of passengers. We therefore paid the passage money, went ashore again and provided ourselves with a few necessaries, rejoined her, and shortly before nightfall steamed into the Canal. Port Said was a thing of the past. Our eventful journey was resumed — what was the end of it all to be?



PART II

CHAPTER 10

WE REACH AUSTRALIA, AND THE RESULT

The *Pescadore*, if she was slow, was certainly sure, and so the thirty-sixth day after our departure from Port Said, as recorded in the previous chapter, she landed us safe and sound at Williamstown, which, as all the Australian world knows, is one of the principal railway termini, and within an hour's journey of Melbourne. Throughout the voyage nothing occurred worth chronicling, if I except the curious behaviour of Lord Beckenham, who, for the first week or so, seemed sunk in a deep lethargy, from which neither chaff nor sympathy could rouse him. From morning till night he mooned aimlessly about the decks, had visibly to pull himself together to answer such questions as might be addressed to him, and never by any chance sustained a conversation beyond a few odd sentences. To such a pitch did this depression at last bring him that, the day after we left Aden, I felt it my duty to take him to task and to try to bully or coax him out of it.

"Come," I said, "I want to know what's the matter with you. You've been giving us all the miseries lately, and from the look of your face at the present moment I'm inclined to believe it's going to continue. Out with it! Are you homesick, or has the monotony of this voyage been too much for you?"

He looked into my face rather anxiously, I thought, and then said: "Mr. Hatteras, I'm afraid you'll think me an awful idiot when I *do* tell you, but the truth is I've got Dr. Nikola's face on my brain, and do what I will I cannot rid myself of it. Those great, searching eyes, as we saw them in that terrible room, have got on my nerves, and I can think of nothing else. They haunt me night and day!"

"Oh, that's all fancy!" I cried. "Why on earth should you be frightened of him? Nikola, in spite of his demoniacal cleverness, is only a man, and even then you may consider that we've seen the last of him. So cheer up, take as much exercise as you possibly can, and believe me, you'll soon forget all about him."

But it was no use arguing with him. Nikola had had an effect upon the youth that was little short of marvellous, and it was not until we had well turned the Leuwin, and were safely in Australian waters, that he in any way recovered his former spirits.

And here, lest you should give me credit for a bravery I did not possess, I must own that I was more than a little afraid of another meeting with Nikola, myself. I had had four opportunities afforded me of judging of his cleverness — once in the restaurant off Oxford Street, once in the *Green Sailor* public-house in the East India Dock Road, once in the West of England express, and lastly, in the house in Port Said. I had no desire, therefore, to come to close quarters with him again.

Arriving in Melbourne we caught the afternoon express for Sydney, reaching that city the following morning a little after breakfast. By the time we had arrived at our destination we had held many consultations over our future, and the result was a decision to look for a quiet hotel on the outskirts of the city, and then to attempt to discover what the mystery, in which we had been so deeply involved, might mean. The merits of all the various suburbs were severally discussed, though I knew but little about them, and the Marquis less. Paramatta, Penrith, Woolahra, Balmain, and even many of the bays and harbours, received attention, until we decided on the last named as the most likely place to answer our purpose.

This settled, we crossed Darling harbour, and, after a little hunting about, discovered a small but comfortable hotel situated in a side street, called the *General Officer*. Here we booked rooms, deposited our meagre baggage, and having installed ourselves, sat down and discussed the situation.

"So this is Sydney," said Beckenham, stretching himself out comfortably upon the sofa as he spoke. "And now that we've got here, what's to be done first?"

"Have lunch," I answered promptly.

"And then?" he continued.

"Hunt up the public library and take a glimpse of the *Morning Herald's* back numbers. They will tell us a good deal, though not all we want to know. Then we'll make a few inquiries. To-morrow morning I shall ask you to excuse me for a couple of hours. But in the afternoon we ought to have acquired sufficient information to enable us to make a definite start."

"Then let's have lunch at once and be off. I'm all eagerness to get to work."

We accordingly ordered lunch, and, when it was finished, set off in search of a public library. Having found it — and it was not a very difficult matter — we sought the reading room and made for a stand of *Sydney Morning Herald's* in the corner. Somehow I felt as certain of finding what I wanted there as any man could possibly be, and as it happened I was not disappointed. On the second page, beneath a heading in bold type, was a long report of a horse show, held the previous afternoon, at which it appeared a large vice-regal and fashionable party were present. The list included His Excellency the Governor and the Countess of Amberley, the Ladies Maud and Ermyntrude, their daughters, the Marquis of Beckenham, Captain Barrenden, an aide-de-camp, and Mr. Baxter. In a voice that I hardly recognized as my own, so shaken was it with excitement, I called Beckenham to my side and pointed out to him his name. He stared, looked away, then stared again, hardly able to believe his eyes.

"What does it mean?" he whispered, just as he had done in Port Said. "What does it mean?"

I led him out of the building before I answered, and then clapped him on the shoulder. "It means, my boy," I said, "that there's been a hitch in their arrangements, and that we're not too late to circumvent them after all."

"But where do you think they are staying — these two scoundrels?"

"At Government House, to be sure. Didn't you see that the report said, 'The Earl and Countess of Amberley and a distinguished party from Government House, including the Marquis of Beckenham,' etc.?"

"Then let us go to Government House at once and unmask them. That is our bounden duty to society."

"Then all I can say is, if it is our duty to society, society will have to wait. No, no! We must find out first what their little game is. That once decided, the unmasking will fall in as a natural consequence. Don't you understand?"

"I am afraid I don't quite. However, I expect you're right."

By this time we were back again at the ferry. It was not time for the boat to start, so while we waited we amused ourselves staring at the placards pasted about on the wharf hoardings. Then a large theatrical poster caught my eye and drew me towards it. It announced a grand vice-regal "command" night at one of the principal theatres for that very evening, and further set forth the fact that the most noble the Marquis of Beckenham would be amongst the distinguished company.

"Here we are," I called to my companion, who was at a little distance. "We'll certainly go to this. The Marquis of Beckenham shall honour it with his patronage and presence after all."

We went back to our hotel for dinner, and as soon as it was eaten returned to the city to seek the theatre.

When we entered it the building was crowded, and the arrival of the Government House party was momentarily expected. Presently the Governor and a brilliant party entered the vice-regal box. You may be sure of all that vast concourse of people there were none who stared harder than Beckenham and myself. And it was certainly enough to make any man stare, for there, sitting on her ladyship's right hand, faultlessly dressed, was the exact image of the young man by my side. The likeness was so extraordinary that for a moment I could hardly believe that Beckenham had not left me to go up and take his seat there. And if I was struck by the resemblance, you may be sure that he was a dozen times more so. Indeed, his bewilderment was most comical, and must have struck those people round us, who were watching, as something altogether extraordinary. I looked again, and could just discern behind the front row the smug, self-satisfied face of the tutor Baxter. Then the play commenced, and we were compelled to turn and give it our attention.

Here I must stop to chronicle one circumstance that throughout the day had struck me as peculiar. When our vessel arrived at Williamstown, it so happened that we had travelled up in the train to Melbourne with a tall, handsome, well-dressed man of about thirty years of age. Whether he, like ourselves, was a new arrival in the Colony, and only passing through Melbourne, I cannot say; at any rate he went on to Sydney in the mail train with us. Then we lost sight of him, only to find him standing near the public library when we had emerged from it that afternoon, and now here he was sitting in the stalls of the theatre not half a dozen chairs from us. Whether this continual companionship was designed or only accidental, I could not of course say, but I must own that I did not like the look of it. Could it be possible, I asked myself,

that Nikola, learning our departure for Australia in the *Pescadore*, had cabled from Port Said to this man to watch us?

The performance over, we left the theatre, and set off for the ferry, only reaching it just as the boat was casting off. As it was I had to jump for it, and on reaching the deck should have fallen in a heap but for a helping hand that was stretched out to me. I looked up to tender my thanks, when to my surprise I discovered that my benefactor was none other than the man to whom I have just been referring. His surprise was even greater than mine, and muttering something about “a close shave,” he turned and walked quickly aft. My mind was now made up, and I accordingly reported my discovery to Beckenham, pointing out the man and warning him to watch for him when he was abroad without me. This he promised to do.

Next morning I donned my best attire (my luggage having safely arrived), and shortly before eleven o’clock bade Beckenham good-bye and betook myself to Potts Point to call upon the Wetherells.

It would be impossible for me to say with what varied emotions I trod that well-remembered street, crossed the garden, and approached the ponderous front door, which somehow had always seemed to me so typical of Mr. Wetherell himself. The same butler who had opened the door to me on the previous occasion opened it now, and when I asked if Miss Wetherell were at home, he gravely answered, “Yes, sir,” and invited me to enter.

I was shown into the drawing-room — a large double chamber beautifully furnished and possessing an elegantly painted ceiling — while the butler went in search of his mistress. A few moments later I heard a light footstep outside, a hand was placed upon the handle of the door, and before I could have counted ten, Phyllis — my Phyllis! — was in the room and in my arms! Over the next five minutes, gentle reader, we will draw a curtain with your kind permission. If you have ever met your sweetheart after an absence of several months, you will readily understand why!

When we had become rational again I led her to a sofa, and, seating myself beside her, asked if her father had in any way relented. At this she looked very unhappy, and for a moment I thought was going to burst into tears.

“Why! What is the matter, Phyllis, my darling?” I cried in sincere alarm. “What is troubling you?”

“Oh, I am so unhappy,” she replied. “Dick, there is a gentleman in Sydney now to whom papa has taken an enormous fancy, and he is exerting all his influence over me to induce me to marry him.”

“The deuce he is, and pray who may —” but I got no farther in my inquiries, for at that moment I caught the sound of a footstep in the hall, and next moment Mr. Wetherell opened the door. He remained for a brief period looking from one to the other of us without speaking, then he advanced, saying, “Mr. Hatteras, please be so good as to tell me when this persecution will cease? Am I not even to be free of you in my own house. Flesh and blood won’t stand it, I tell you, sir — won’t stand it! You pursued my daughter to England in a most ungentlemanly fashion, and now you have followed her out here again.”

“Just as I shall continue to follow her all my life, Mr. Wetherell,” I replied warmly, “wherever you may take her. I told you on board the *Orizaba*, months ago, that I loved her: well, I love her ten thousand times more now. She loves me — won’t you hear her tell you so? Why then should you endeavour to keep us apart?”

“Because an alliance with you, sir, is distasteful to me in every possible way. I have other views for my daughter, you must learn.” Here Phyllis could keep silence no longer, and broke in with — “If you mean by that that you will force me into this hateful marriage with a man I despise, papa, you are mistaken. I will marry no one but Mr. Hatteras, and so I warn you.”

“Silence, Miss! How dare you adopt that tone with me! You will do as I wish in this and all other matters, and so we’ll have no more talk about it. Now, Mr. Hatteras, you have heard what I have to say, and I warn you that, if you persist in this conduct, I’ll see if something can’t be found in the law to put a stop to it. Meanwhile, if you show yourself in my grounds again, I’ll have my servants throw you out into the street! Good-day.”

Unjust as his conduct was to me, there was nothing for it but to submit, so picking up my hat I bade poor little frightened Phyllis farewell, and went towards the door. But before taking my departure I was determined to have one final shot at her irascible parent, so I said, “Mr. Wetherell, I have warned you before, and I do so again: your daughter loves me, and, come what may, I will make her my wife. She is her own mistress, and you cannot force her into marrying any one against her will. Neither can you prevent her marrying me if she wishes it. You will be sorry some day that you have behaved like this to me.”

But the only answer he vouchsafed was a stormy one. “Leave my house this instant,” he said. “Not another word, sir, or

I'll call my servants to my assistance!"

The stately old butler opened the front door for me, and assuming as dignified an air as was possible, I went down the drive and passed out into the street.

When I reached home again Beckenham was out, for which I was not sorry, as I wanted to have a good quiet think by myself. So lighting a cigar, I pulled a chair into the verandah and fell to work. But I could make nothing of the situation, save that, by my interview this morning, my position with the father was, if possible, rendered even more hopeless than before. Who was this more fortunate suitor? Would it be any use my going to him and — but no, that was clearly impossible. Could I induce Phyllis to run away with me? That was possible, of course, but I rather doubted if she would care to take such an extreme step until every other means had proved unsuccessful. Then what was to be done? I began to wish that Beckenham would return in order that we might consult together.

Half an hour later our lunch was ready, but still no sign came of the youth. Where could he have got to? I waited an hour and then fell to work. Three o'clock arrived and still no sign — four, five, and even six. By this time I was in a fever of anxiety. I remembered the existence of the man who had followed us from Melbourne, and Beckenham's trusting good nature. Then and there I resolved, if he did not return before half-past seven, to set off for the nearest police-station and have a search made for him. Slowly the large hand of the clock went round, and when, at the time stated, he had not appeared, I donned my hat and, inquiring the way, set off for the home of the law.

On arriving there and stating my business I was immediately conducted to the inspector in charge, who questioned me very closely as to Beckenham's appearance, age, profession, etc. Having done this, he said:—

"But what reason have you, sir, for supposing that the young man has been done away with? He has only been absent from his abode, according to your statement, about eight or nine hours."

"Simply because," I answered, "I have the best of reasons for knowing that ever since his arrival in Australia he has been shadowed. This morning he said he would only go for a short stroll before lunch, and I am positively certain, knowing my anxiety about him, he would not have remained away so long of his own accord without communicating with me."

"Is there any motive you can assign for this shadowing?"

"My friend is heir to an enormous property in England. Perhaps that may assist you in discovering one?"

"Very possibly. But still I am inclined to think you are a little hasty in coming to so terrible a conclusion, Mr. —?"

"Hatteras is my name, and I am staying at the *General Officer Hotel* in Palgrave Street."

"Well, Mr. Hatteras, if I were you I would go back to your hotel. You will probably find your friend there eating his dinner and thinking about instituting a search for you. If, however, he has not turned up, and does not do so by to-morrow morning, call here again and report the matter, and I will give you every assistance."

Thanking him for his courtesy I left the station and walked quickly back to the hotel, hoping to find Beckenham safely returned and at his dinner. But when the landlady met me in the verandah, and asked if I had any news of my friend, I realized that a disappointment was in store for me. By this time the excitement and worry were getting too much for me. What with Nikola, the spy, Beckenham, Phyllis, the unknown lover, and old Mr. Wetherell, I had more than enough to keep my brain occupied. I sat down on a chair on the verandah with a sigh and reviewed the whole case. Nine o'clock struck by the time my reverie was finished. Just as I did so a newspaper boy came down the street lustily crying his wares. To divert my mind from its unpleasant thoughts, I called him up and bought an *Evening Mercury*. Having done so I passed into my sitting-room to read it. The first, second, and third pages held nothing of much interest to me, but on the fourth was an item which was astonishing enough to almost make my hair stand on end. It ran as follows:

IMPORTANT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH LIFE.

We have it on the very best authority that an engagement will shortly be announced between a certain illustrious young nobleman, now a visitor in our city, and the beautiful daughter of one of Sydney's most prominent politicians, who has lately returned from a visit to England. The *Evening Mercury* tenders the young couple their sincerest congratulations.

Could this be the solution of the whole mystery? Could it be that the engagement of Baxter, the telegram, the idea of travel, the drugging, the imprisonment in Port Said, the substitution of the false marquis, were all means to this end? Was it possible that this man, who was masquerading as a man of title, was to marry Phyllis (for there could be no possible doubt as to the person to whom that paragraph referred)? The very thought of such a thing was not to be endured.

There must be no delay now, I told myself, in revealing all I knew. The villains must be unmasked this very night. Wetherell should know all as soon as I could tell him. As I came to this conclusion I crushed my paper into my pocket and set off, without a moment's delay, for Potts Point. The night was dark, and now a thick drizzle was falling.

Though it really did not take me very long, it seemed an eternity before I reached the house and rang the bell. The butler opened the door, and was evidently surprised to see me. "Is Mr. Wetherell at home?" I asked.

For a moment he looked doubtful as to what he should say, then compromising matters, answered that he would see.

"I know what that means," I said in reply. "Mr. Wetherell is in, but you don't think he'll see me. But he must! I have news for him of the very utmost importance. Will you tell him that?"

He left me and went along the hall and upstairs. Presently he returned, shaking his head.

"I am very sorry, sir, but Mr. Wetherell's answer is, if you have anything to tell him you must put it in writing; he cannot see you."

"But he must! In this case I can accept no refusal. Tell him, will you, that the matter upon which I wish to speak to him has nothing whatsoever to do with the request I made to him this morning. I pledge him my word on that."

Again the butler departed, and once more I was left to cool my heels in the portico. When he returned it was with a smile upon his face. "Mr. Wetherell will be glad if you will step this way, sir."

I followed him along the hall and up the massive stone staircase. Arriving at the top he opened a door on the left-hand side and announced "Mr. Hatteras."

I found Mr. Wetherell seated in a low chair opposite the fire, and from the fact that his right foot was resting on a sort of small trestle, I argued that he was suffering from an attack of his old enemy the gout.

"Be good enough to take a chair, Mr. Hatteras," he said, when the door had been closed. "I must own I am quite at a loss to understand what you can have to tell me of so much importance as to bring you to my house at this time of night."

"I think I shall be able to satisfy you on that score, Mr. Wetherell," I replied, taking the *Evening Mercury* from my pocket and smoothing it out. "In the first place, will you be good enough to tell me if there is any truth in the inference contained in that paragraph."

I handed the paper to him and pointed to the lines in question. Having put on his glasses he examined it carefully. "I am sorry they should have made it public so soon, I must admit," he said. "But I don't deny that there is a considerable amount of truth in what that paragraph reports."

"You mean by that that you intend to try and marry Phyllis to the Marquis of Beckenham?"

"The young man has paid her a very considerable amount of attention ever since he arrived in the colony, and only last week he did me the honour of confiding his views to me. You see I am candid with you."

"I thank you for it. I, too, will be candid with you. Mr. Wetherell, you may set your mind at rest at once, this marriage will never take place!"

"And pray be so good as to tell me your reason for such a statement?"

"If you want it bluntly, because the young man now staying at Government House is no more the Marquis of Beckenham than I am. He is a fraud, an impostor, a cheat of the first water, put up to play his part by one of the cleverest scoundrels unhung."

"Mr. Hatteras, this is really going too far. I can quite understand your being jealous of his lordship, but I cannot understand your having the audacity to bring such a foolish charge against him. I, for one, must decline to listen to it. If he had been the fraud you make him out, how would his tutor have got those letters from his Grace the Duke of Glenbarth? Do you imagine his Excellency the Governor, who has known the family all his life, would not have discovered him ere this? No, no, sir! It won't do! If you think so, who has schooled him so cleverly? Who has pulled the strings so wonderfully?"

"Why, Nikola, to be sure!"

Had I clapped a revolver to the old gentleman's head, or had the walls opened and Nikola himself stepped into the room, a greater effect of terror and consternation could not have been produced in the old gentleman's face than did those five simple words. He fell back in his chair gasping for breath, his complexion became ashen in its pallor, and for a moment his whole nervous system seemed unstrung. I sprang to his assistance, thinking he was going to have a fit, but he waived

me off, and when he had recovered himself sufficiently to speak, said hoarsely — “What do you know of Dr. Nikola? Tell me, for God’s sake! — what do you know of him? Quick, quick!”

Thereupon I set to work and told him my story, from the day of my arrival in Sydney from Thursday Island up to the moment of my reaching his house, described my meeting and acquaintance with the real Beckenham, and all the events consequent upon it. He listened, with an awful terror growing in his face, and when I had finished my narrative with the disappearance of my friend he nearly choked.

“Mr. Hatteras,” he gasped, “will you swear this is the truth you are telling me?”

“I solemnly swear it,” I answered. “And will do so in public when and where you please.”

“Then before I do anything else I will beg your pardon for my conduct to you. You have taken a noble revenge. I cannot thank you sufficiently. But there is not a moment to lose. My daughter is at a ball at Government House at the present moment. I should have accompanied her, but my gout would not permit me. Will you oblige me by ringing that bell?”

I rang the bell as requested, and then asked what he intended doing.

“Going off to his Excellency at once, gout or no gout, and telling him what you have told me. If it is as you have said, we must catch these scoundrels and rescue your friend without an instant’s delay!”

Half an hour later we were at Government House waiting in his Excellency’s study for an interview. The music of the orchestra in the ball-room came faintly in to us, and when Lord Amberley entered the room he seemed surprised, as well he might be, to see us. But as soon as he had heard what we had to tell him his expression changed. “Mr. Wetherell, this is a very terrible charge you bring against my guest. Do you think it can possibly be true?”

“I sadly fear so,” said Mr. Wetherell. “But perhaps Mr. Hatteras will tell you the story as he told it to me.”

I did so, and, when I had finished, the Governor went to the door and called a servant.

“Find Lord Beckenham, Johnson, at once, and ask him to be so good as to come to me here. Stay — on second thoughts I’ll go and look for him myself.”

He went off, leaving us alone again to listen to the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece, and to wonder what was going to happen next. Five minutes went by and then ten, but still he did not return. When he did so it was with a still more serious countenance.

“You are evidently right, gentlemen. Neither the spurious marquis, nor his tutor, Mr. Baxter, can be found anywhere. I have discovered, too, that all their valuables and light luggage have been smuggled out of the house to-night without the knowledge of my servants. This is a terrible business. But I have given instructions, and the police will be communicated with at once. Now we must do our best to find the real Beckenham.”

“Lord Amberley,” said Wetherell, in a choking voice, “do you think one of your servants could tell my daughter to come to me at once? I am not feeling very well.”

The Governor hesitated a moment, and then said —

“I am sorry to say, Mr. Wetherell, your daughter left the House an hour ago. A message was brought to her that you had been suddenly taken ill and needed her. She went off at once.”

Wetherell’s anxiety was piteous to see.

“My God!” he cried in despair. “If that is so, I am ruined. This is Nikola’s revenge.”

Then he uttered a curious little sigh, moved a step forward, and fell in a dead faint upon the floor.



CHAPTER 11

ON THE TRAIL

As soon as Wetherell was able to speak again he said as feebly as an old man of ninety, "Take me home, Mr. Hatteras, take me home, and let us think out together what is best to be done to rescue my poor child."

The Governor rose to his feet and gave him his arm.

"I think you're right, Mr. Wetherell," he said. "It is of course just probable that you will find your daughter at her home when you arrive. God grant she may be! But in case she is not I will communicate all I know to the Police Commissioner on his arrival, and send him and his officers on to you. We must lose no time if we wish to catch these scoundrels." Then turning to me, he continued: "Mr. Hatteras, it is owing to your promptness that we are able to take such early steps. I shall depend upon your further assistance in this matter."

"You may do so with perfect confidence," I answered. "If you knew all you would understand that I am more anxious perhaps than any one to discover the whereabouts of the young lady and my unfortunate friend."

Next moment we were being whirled down the drive at a pace which at any other time I should have thought dangerous. Throughout the journey we sat almost silent, wrapped in our anxieties and forebodings; hoping almost against hope that when we arrived at Potts Point we should find Phyllis awaiting us there. At last we turned into the grounds, and on reaching the house I sprang out and rang the bell, then I went down to help my companion to alight. The butler opened the door and descended the steps to take the rugs. Wetherell stopped him almost angrily, crying:

"Where is your mistress? Has she come home?"

The expression of surprise on the man's face told me, before he had time to utter a word, that our hopes were not to be realized. "Miss Phyllis, sir?" the man said. "Why, she's at the ball."

Wetherell turned from him with a deep sigh, and taking my arm went heavily up the steps into the hall.

"Come to my study, Mr. Hatteras," he said, "and let me confer with you. For God's sake don't desert me in my hour of need!"

"You need have no fear of that," I answered. "If it is bad for you, think what it is for me." And then we went upstairs together.

Reaching his study, Mr. Wetherell led the way in and sat down. I went across to the hearthrug and stood before him. "Now," I said, "we must think this out from the very beginning, and to do that properly we must consider every detail. Have you any objection to answering my questions?"

"Ask any questions you like," he replied, "and I will answer them."

"In the first place, then, how soon after his arrival in the colony did your daughter get to know that sham Beckenham?"

"Three days," he answered.

"At a dance, dinner party, picnic, or what?"

"At none of these things. The young man, it appears, had seen my daughter in the street, and having been struck with her beauty asked one of the aides-de-camp at Government House, with whom we are on intimate terms, to bring him to call. At the time, I remember, I thought it a particularly friendly action on his part."

"I don't doubt it," I answered. "Well that, I think, should tell us one thing."

"And what is that?"

"That his instructions were to get to know your daughter without delay."

"But what could his reason have been?"

"Ah, that I cannot tell you just yet. Now you must pardon what I am going to say: do you think he was serious in his intentions regarding Phyllis — I mean your daughter?"

"Perfectly, as far as I could tell. His desire, he said, was, if she would have him, to be allowed to marry her on his

twenty-first birthday, which would be next week, and in proof of permission he showed me a cablegram from his father.”

“A forgery, I don’t doubt. Well, then, the only construction I can put upon it is that the arrival of the real Beckenham in Sydney must have frightened him, thus compelling the gang to resort to other means of obtaining possession of her at once. Now our next business must be to find out how that dastardly act was accomplished. May I ring the bell and have up the coachman who drove your daughter to the ball?”

“By all means. Please act in every way in this matter as if this house were your own.”

I rang the bell, and when the butler appeared to answer it Mr. Wetherell instructed him to find the man I wanted and send him up. The servant left the room again, and for five minutes we awaited his reappearance in silence. When he did come back he said, “Thompson has not come home yet, sir.”

“Not come home yet! Why, it’s nearly eleven o’clock! Send him in directly he arrives. Hark! What bell is that?”

“Front door, sir.”

“Go down and answer it then, and if it should be the Commissioner of Police show him up here at once.”

As it turned out it was not the Commissioner of Police, but an Inspector.

“Good-evening,” said Mr. Wetherell. “You have come from Government House, I presume?”

“Exactly so, sir,” replied the Inspector. “His Excellency gave us some particulars and then sent us on.”

“You know the nature of the case?”

“His Excellency informed us himself.”

“And what steps have you taken?”

“Well, sir, to begin with, we have given orders for a thorough search throughout the city and suburbs for the tutor and the sham nobleman, at the same time more men are out looking for the real Lord Beckenham. We are also trying to find your coachman, who was supposed to have driven Miss Wetherell away from Government House, and also the carriage, which is certain to be found before very long.”

He had hardly finished speaking before there was another loud ring at the bell, and presently the butler entered once more. Crossing to Mr. Wetherell, he said —

“Two policemen are at the front door, and they have brought Thompson home, sir.”

“Ah! We are likely to have a little light thrown upon the matter now. Let them bring him up here.”

“He’s not in a very nice state, sir.”

“Never mind that. Bring him up here, instantly!”

Again the butler departed, and a few moments later heavy footsteps ascended the stairs and approached the study door. Then two stalwart policemen entered the room supporting between them a miserable figure in coachman’s livery. His hat and coat were gone and his breeches were stained with mud, while a large bruise totally obscured his left eye.

“Stand him over there opposite me,” said Mr. Wetherell, pointing to the side of the room furthest from the door. The policemen did as they were ordered, while the man looked more dead than alive.

“Now, Thompson,” said Wetherell, looking sternly at him, “what have you got to say for yourself?”

But the man only groaned. Seeing that in his present state he could say nothing, I went across to the table and mixed him a glass of grog. When I gave it to him he drank it eagerly. It seemed to sharpen his wits, for he answered instantly —

“It wasn’t my fault, sir. If I’d only ha’ known what their game was I’d have been killed afore I’d have let them do anything to hurt the young lady. But they was too cunnin’ for me, sir.”

“Be more explicit, sir!” said Wetherell sternly. “Don’t stand there whining, but tell your story straight-forwardly and at once.”

The poor wretch pulled himself together and did his best. “It was in this way, sir,” he began. “Last week I was introduced by a friend of mine to as nice a spoken man as ever I saw. He was from England, he said and having a little money thought he’d like to try his ‘and at a bit o’ racing in Australia, like. He was on the look-out for a smart man, he said, who’d be able to put him up to a wrinkle or two, and maybe train for him later on. He went on to say that he’d ‘eard a lot about me, and thought I was just the man for his money. Well, we got more and more friendly till the other night, Monday, when he said as how he’d settled on a farm a bit out in the country, and was going to sign the agreement, as they called it,

for to rent it next day. He was goin' to start a stud farm and trainin' establishment combined, and would I take the billet of manager at three 'undred a year? Anyway, as he said, 'Don't be in a 'urry to decide; take your time and think it over. Meet me at the *Canary Bird 'Otel* on Thursday night (that's to-night, sir) and give me your decision.' Well, sir, I drove Miss Wetherell to Government 'Ouse, sir, according to orders, and then, comin' 'ome, went round by the *Canary Bird*, to give 'im my answer, thinkin' no 'arm could ever come of it. When I drove up he was standin' at the door smoking his cigar, an' bein' an affable sort of fellow, invited me inside to take a drink. 'I don't like to leave the box,' I said. 'Oh, never mind your horse,' says he. "Ere's a man as will stand by it for five minutes.' He gave a respectable lookin' chap, alongside the lamp-post, a sixpence, and he 'eld the 'orse; so in I went. When we got inside I was for goin' to the bar, but 'e says, 'No. This is an important business matter, and we don't want to be over'eard.' With that he leads the way into a private room at the end of the passage and shuts the door. 'What's yours?' says he. 'A nobbler o' rum,' says I. Then he orders a nobbler of rum for me and a nobbler of whisky for 'imself. And when it was brought we sat talkin' of the place he'd thought o' takin' an' the 'orses he was goin' to buy, an' then 'e says, "Ullo! Somebody listenin' at the door. I 'eard a step. Jump up and look.' I got up and ran to the door, but there was nobody there, so I sat down again and we went on talking. Then he says, takin' up his glass: "Ere's to your 'ealth, Mr. Thompson, and success to the farm.' We both drank it an' went on talkin' till I felt that sleepy I didn't know what to do. Then I dropped off, an' after that I don't remember nothin' of what 'appened till I woke up in the Domain, without my hat and coat, and found a policeman shakin' me by the shoulder."

"The whole thing is as plain as daylight," cried Wetherell bitterly. "It is a thoroughly organized conspiracy, having me for its victim. Oh, my poor little girlie! What has my obstinacy brought you to!"

Seeing the old man in this state very nearly broke me down, but I mastered myself with an effort and addressed a question to the unfortunate coachman —

"Pull yourself together, Thompson, and tell me as correctly as you can what this friend of yours was like."

I fully expected to hear him give an exact description of the man who had followed us from Melbourne, but I was mistaken.

"I don't know, sir," said Thompson, "as I could rightly tell you, my mind being still a bit dizzy-like. He was tall, but not by any manner of means big made; he had very small 'ands 'an feet, a sort o' what they call death's-'ead complexion; 'is 'air was black as soot, an' so was 'is eyes, an' they sparkled like two diamonds."

"Do you remember noticing if he had a curious gold ring on his little finger, like a snake?"

"He had, sir, with two eyes made of some black stone. That's just as true as you're born."

"Then it was Nikola," I cried in an outburst of astonishment, "and he followed us to Australia after all!"

Wetherell gave a deep sigh that was more like a groan than anything; then he became suddenly a new man.

"Mr. Inspector," he cried to the police officer, "that man, or traces of him, must be found before daylight. I know him, and he is as slippery as an eel; if you lose a minute he'll be through your fingers."

"One moment first," I cried. "Tell me this, Thompson: when you drove up to the *Canary Bird Hotel* where did you say this man was standing?"

"In the verandah, sir."

"Had he his hat on?"

"Yes, sir."

"And then you went towards the bar, but it was crowded, so he took you to a private room?"

"Yes, sir."

"And once there he began giving you the details of this farm he proposed starting. Did he work out any figures on paper?"

"Yes, sir."

"On what?"

"On a letter or envelope; I'm not certain which."

"Which of course he took from his pocket?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good," I said. Then turning to the police officer, "Now, Mr. Inspector, shall we be off to the *Canary Bird*?"

"If you wish it, sir. In the meantime I'll send instructions back by these men to the different stations. Before breakfast time we must have the man who held the horse."

"You don't know him, I suppose?" I asked Thompson.

"No, sir; but I've seen him before," he answered.

"He's a Sydney fellow, then?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Then there should be no difficulty in catching him. Now let us be going."

Mr. Wetherell rose to accompany us, but hard though it was to stop him I eventually succeeded in dissuading him from such a course.

"But you will let me know directly you discover anything, won't you, Mr. Hatteras?" he cried as we were about to leave the room. "Think of my anxiety."

I gave my promise and then, accompanied by the Inspector, left the house. Hailing a passing cab we jumped into it and told the driver to proceed as fast as he could to the hotel in question. Just as we started a clock in the neighbourhood struck twelve. Phyllis had been in Nikola's hands three hours.

Pulling up opposite the *Canary Bird* (the place where the coachman had been drugged), we jumped out and bade the cabman wait. The hotel was in complete darkness, and it was not until we had pealed the bell twice that we succeeded in producing any sign of life. Then the landlord, half dressed, carrying a candle in his hand, came downstairs and called out to know who was there and what we wanted. My companion immediately said "Police," and in answer to that magic word the door was unbarred.

"Good-evening, Mr. Bartrell," said the Inspector. "May we come in for a moment on business?"

"Certainly, Mr. Inspector," said the landlord, who evidently knew my companion. "But isn't this rather late for a call. I hope there is nothing the matter?"

"Nothing much," returned the Inspector: "only we want to make a few inquiries about a man who was here to-night, and for whom we are looking."

"If that is so I'm afraid I must call my barman. I was not in the bar this evening. If you'll excuse me I'll go and bring him down. In the meantime make yourselves comfortable."

He left us to kick our heels in the hall while he went upstairs again. In about ten minutes, and just as my all-consuming impatience was well-nigh getting the better of me, he returned, bringing with him the sleepy barman.

"These gentlemen want some information about a man who was here to-night," the landlord said by way of introduction. "Perhaps you can give it?"

"What was he like, sir?" asked the barman of the Inspector. The latter, however, turned to me.

"Tall, slim, with a sallow complexion," I said, "black hair and very dark restless eyes. He came in here with the Hon. Sylvester Wetherell's coachman."

The man seemed to recollect him at once.

"I remember him," he said. "They sat in No. 5 down the passage there, and the man you mention ordered a nobbler of rum and a whisky."

"That's the fellow we want," said the Inspector. "Now tell me this, have you ever seen him in here before?"

"Never once," said the barman, "and that's a solemn fact, because if I had I couldn't have forgotten it. His figure-head wouldn't let you do that. No, sir, to-night was the first night he's ever been in the *Canary Bird*."

"Did any one else visit them while they were in the room together?"

"Not as I know of. But stay, I'm not so certain. Yes; I remember seeing a tall, good-looking chap come down the passage and go in there. But it was some time, half an hour maybe, after I took in the drinks."

"Did you see him come out again?"

"No. But I know the coachman got very drunk, and had to be carried out to the carriage."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I saw the other two doing it."

The Inspector turned to me.

"Not very satisfactory, is it?"

"No," I answered. "But do you mind letting us look into No. 5 — the room they occupied?"

"Not at all," said the landlord. "Come with me."

So saying he led the way down the passage to a little room on the right-hand side, the door of which he threw open with a theatrical flourish. It was in pitch darkness, but a few seconds later the gas was lit and we could see all that it contained. A small table stood in the centre of the room, and round the walls were ranged two or three wooden chairs. A small window was at the further end and a fireplace opposite the door. On the table was a half-smoked cigar and a torn copy of the *Evening Mercury*. But that was not what I wanted, so I went down on my hands and knees and looked about upon the floor. Presently I descried a small ball of paper near the grate. Picking it up I seated myself at the table and turned to the barman, who was watching my movements attentively.

"Was this room used by any other people after the party we are looking for left?"

"No, sir. There was nobody in either of these two bottom rooms."

"You are quite certain of that?"

"Perfectly certain."

I took up the ball of paper, unrolled it and spread it out upon the table. To my disgust it was only the back half of an envelope, and though it had a few figures dotted about upon it, was of no possible use to us.

"Nothing there?" asked the Inspector.

"Nothing at all," I answered bitterly, "save a few incomprehensible figures."

"Well, in that case, we'd better be getting up to the station and see if they've discovered anything yet."

"Come along, then," I answered. "We must be quick though, for we've lost a lot of precious time, and every minute counts."

I took up the *Evening Mercury* and followed him out to the cab, after having sincerely thanked the hotel proprietor and the barman for their courtesy. The Inspector gave the driver his orders and we set off. As we went we discussed our next movements, and while we were doing so I idly glanced at the paper I held in my hand. There was a lamp in the cab, and the light showed me on the bottom right-hand corner a round blue india-rubber stamp mark, "W. E. Maxwell, stationer and newsagent, 23, Ipswell Street, Woolahra."

"Stop the cab!" I almost shouted. "Tell the man to drive us back to the *Canary Bird* quickly."

The order was given, the cab faced round, and in less than a minute we were on our way back.

"What's up now?" asked the astonished Inspector.

"Only that I believe I've got a clue," I cried.

I did not explain any further, and in five minutes we had brought the landlord downstairs again.

"I'm sorry to trouble you in this fashion," I cried, "but life and death depend on it. I want you to let me see No. 5 again."

He conducted us to the room, and once more the gas was lit. The small strip of envelope lay upon the table just as I had thrown it down. I seated myself and again looked closely at it. Then I sprang to my feet.

"I thought so!" I cried excitedly, pointing to the paper; "I told you I had a clue. Now, Mr. Inspector, who wrote those figures?"

"The man you call Nikola, I suppose."

"That's right. Now who would have bought this newspaper? You must remember that Thompson only left his box to come in here."

"Nikola, I suppose."

"Very good. Then according to your own showing Nikola owned this piece of envelope and this *Evening Mercury*. If that is certain, look here!"

He came round and looked over my shoulder. I pointed to what was evidently part of the gummed edge of the top of the envelope. On it were these three important words, "— swell Street, Woolahra."

"Well," he said, "what about it?"

"Why, look here!" I said, as I opened the *Evening Mercury* and pointed to the stamp-mark at the bottom. "The man who bought this newspaper at Mr. Maxwell's shop also bought this envelope there. The letters 'swell' before 'street' constitute the last half of Ipswell, the name of the street. If that man be Nikola, as we suspect, the person who served him is certain to remember him, and it is just within the bounds of possibility he may know his address."

"That's so," said the Inspector, struck with the force of my argument. "I know Mr. Maxwell's shop, and our best plan will be to go on there as fast as we can."

Again thanking the landlord for his civility, we returned to our cab and once more set off, this time for Mr. Maxwell's shop in Ipswell Street. By the time we reached it it was nearly three o'clock, and gradually growing light. As the cab drew up alongside the curb the Inspector jumped out and rang the bell at the side door. It was opened after awhile by a shock-headed youth, who stared at us in sleepy astonishment.

"Does Mr. Maxwell live at the shop?" asked the Inspector.

"No, sir."

"Where then?"

"Ponson Street — third house on the left-hand side."

"Thank you."

Once more we jumped into the cab and rattled off. It seemed to me, so anxious and terrified was I for my darling's safety, that we were fated never to get the information we wanted; the whole thing was like some nightmare, in which, try how I would to move, every step was clogged.

A few minutes' drive brought us to Ponson Street, and we drew up at the third house on the left-hand side. It was a pretty little villa, with a nice front garden and a creeper-covered verandah. We rang the bell and waited. Presently we heard some one coming down the passage, and a moment later the door was unlocked.

"Who is there?" cried a voice from within.

"Police," said my companion as before.

The door was immediately opened, and a very small sandy-complexioned man, dressed in a flaring suit of striped pyjamas, stood before us. "Is anything wrong, gentlemen?" he asked nervously.

"Nothing to affect you, Mr. Maxwell," my companion replied. "We only want a little important information, if you can give it us. We are anxious to discover a man's whereabouts before daylight, and we have been led to believe that you are the only person who can give us the necessary clue."

"Good gracious! But I shall be happy to serve you if I can," the little man answered, leading the way into his dining-room with an air of importance his appearance rather belied. "What is it?"

"Well, it's this," I replied, producing the piece of envelope and the *Evening Mercury*. "You see these letters on the top of this paper, don't you?" He nodded, his attention at once secured by seeing his own name. "Well, that envelope was evidently purchased in your shop. So was this newspaper."

"How can you tell that?"

"In the case of the envelope, by these letters; in that of the paper, by your rubber stamp on the bottom."

"Ah! Well, now, and in what way can I help you?"

"We want to know the address of the man who bought them."

"That will surely be difficult. Can you give me any idea of what he was like?"

"Tall, slightly foreign in appearance, distinctly handsome, sallow complexion, very dark eyes, black hair, small hands and feet."

As my description progressed the little man's face brightened. Then he cried with evident triumph — "I know the man; he came into the shop yesterday afternoon."

"And his address is?"

His face fell again. His information was not quite as helpful as he had expected it would be.

"There I can't help you, I'm sorry to say. He bought a packet of paper and envelopes and the *Evening Mercury* and

then left the shop. I was so struck by his appearance that I went to the door and watched him cross the road.”

“And in which direction did he go?”

“Over to Podgers’ chemist shop across the way. That was the last I saw of him.”

“I’m obliged to you, Mr. Maxwell,” I said, shaking him by the hand. “But I’m sorry you can’t tell us something more definite about him.” Then turning to the Inspector: “I suppose we had better go off and find Podgers. But if we have to spend much more time in rushing about like this we shall be certain to lose them altogether.”

“Let us be off to Podgers’, then, as fast as we can go.”

Bidding Mr. Maxwell good-bye, we set off again, and in ten minutes had arrived at the shop and had Mr. Podgers downstairs. We explained our errand briefly, and gave a minute description of the man we wanted.

“I remember him perfectly,” said the sedate Podgers. “He came into my shop last night and purchased a bottle of chloroform.”

“You made him sign the poison book, of course?”

“Naturally I did, Mr. Inspector. Would you like to see his signature?”

“Very much,” we both answered at once, and the book was accordingly produced.

Podgers ran his finger down the list.

“Brown, Williams, Davis — ah! here it is. ‘Chloroform: J. Venneage, 22, Calliope Street, Woolahra.’”

“Venneage!” I cried. “Why, that’s not his name!”

“Very likely not,” replied Podgers; “but it’s the name he gave me.”

“Never mind, we’ll try 22, Calliope Street, on the chance,” said the Inspector.

Again we drove off, this time at increased pace. In less than fifteen minutes we had turned into the street we wanted, and pulled up about a hundred yards from the junction. It was a small thoroughfare, with a long line of second-class villa residences on either side. A policeman was sauntering along on the opposite side of the way, and the Inspector called him over. He saluted respectfully, and waited to be addressed.

“What do you know of number 22?” asked the Inspector briefly. The constable considered for a few moments, and then said —

“Well, to tell you the truth, sir, I didn’t know until yesterday that it was occupied.”

“Have you seen anybody about there?”

“I saw three men go in just as I came on the beat to-night.”

“What were they like?”

“Well, I don’t know that I looked much at them. They were all pretty big, and they seemed to be laughing and enjoying themselves.”

“Did they! Well, we must go in there and have a look at them. You had better come with us.”

We walked on down the street till we arrived at No. 22. Then opening the gate we went up the steps to the hall door. It was quite light enough by this time to enable us to see everything distinctly. The Inspector gave the bell a good pull and the peal re-echoed inside the house. But not a sound of any living being came from within in answer. Again the bell was pulled, and once more we waited patiently, but with the same result.

“Either there’s nobody at home or they refuse to hear,” said the Inspector. “Constable, you remain where you are and collar the first man you see. Mr. Hatteras, we will go round to the back and try to effect an entrance from there.”

We left the front door, and finding a path reached the yard. The house was only a small one, with a little verandah at the rear on to which the back door opened. On either side of the door were two fair-sized windows, and by some good fortune it chanced that the catch of one of these was broken.

Lifting the sash up, the Inspector jumped into the room, and as soon as he was through I followed him. Then we looked about us. The room, however, was destitute of furniture or occupants.

“I don’t hear anybody about,” my companion said, opening the door that led into the hall. Just at that moment I heard a sound, and touching his arm signed to him to listen. We both did so, and surely enough there came again the faint muttering of a human voice. In the half-dark of the hall it sounded most uncanny.

"Somebody in one of the front rooms," said the Inspector. "I'll slip along and open the front door, bring in the man from outside, and then we'll burst into the room and take our chance of capturing them."

He did as he proposed, and when the constable had joined us we moved towards the room on the left.

Again the mutterings came from the inside, and the Inspector turned the handle of the door. It was locked, however. "Let me burst it in," I whispered.

He nodded, and I accordingly put my shoulder against it, and bringing my strength to bear sent it flying in.

Then we rushed into the room, to find it, at first glance, empty. Just at that moment, however, the muttering began again, and we looked towards the darkest corner; somebody was there, lying on the ground. I rushed across and knelt down to look. *It was Beckenham; his mouth gagged and his hands and feet bound. The noise we had heard was that made by him trying to call us to his assistance.*

In less time than it takes to tell I had cut his bonds and helped him to sit up. Then I explained to the Inspector who he was.

"Thank God you're found!" I cried. "But what does it all mean? How long have you been like this? and where is Nikola?"

"I don't know how long I've been here," he answered, "and I don't know where Nikola is."

"But you must know something about him!" I cried. "For Heaven's sake tell me all you can! I'm in awful trouble, and your story may give me the means of saving a life that is dearer to me than my own."

"Get me something to drink first, then," he replied; "I'm nearly dying of thirst; after that I'll tell you."

Fortunately I had had the foresight to put a flask of whisky into my pocket, and I now took it out and gave him a stiff nobbler. It revived him somewhat, and he prepared to begin his tale. But the Inspector interrupted —

"Before you commence, my lord, I must send word to the Commissioner that you have been found."

He wrote a message on a piece of paper and despatched the constable with it. Having done so he turned to Beckenham and said —

"Now, my lord, pray let us hear your story."

Beckenham forthwith commenced.



CHAPTER 12

LORD BECKENHAM

“W harm could possibly come of it, I started out for a little excursion on my own account. It was about half-past eleven then, when you left me, Mr. Hatteras, I remained in the house for half an hour or so reading. Then, thinking no

“Leaving the hotel I made for the ferry and crossed Darling Harbour to Millers Point; then, setting myself for a good ramble, off I went through the city, up one street and down another, to eventually bring up in the botanical gardens. The view was so exquisite that I sat myself down on a seat and resigned myself to rapturous contemplation of it. How long I remained there I could not possibly say. I only know that while I was watching the movements of a man-o’-war in the cove below me I became aware, by intuition — for I did not look at him — that I was the object of close scrutiny by a man standing some little distance from me. Presently I found him drawing closer to me, until he came boldly up and seated himself beside me. He was a queer-looking little chap, in some ways not unlike my old tutor Baxter, with a shrewd, clean-shaven face, grey hair, bushy eyebrows, and a long and rather hooked nose. He was well dressed, and when we had been sitting side by side for some minutes he turned to me and said —

“It is a beautiful picture we have spread before us, is it not?”

“It is, indeed,” I answered. “And what a diversity of shipping!”

“You may well say that,” he continued. “It would be an interesting study, would it not, to make a list of all the craft that pass in and out of this harbour in a day — to put down the places where they were built and whence they hail, the characters of their owners and commanders, and their errands about the world. What a book it would make, would it not? Look at that man-o’-war in Farm Cove; think of the money she cost, think of where that money came from — the rich people who paid without thinking, the poor who dreaded the coming of the tax collector like a visit from the Evil One; imagine the busy dockyard in which she was built — can’t you seem to hear the clang of the riveters and the buzzing of the steam saws? Then take that Norwegian boat passing the fort there; think of her birthplace in far Norway, think of the places she has since seen, imagine her masts growing in the forests on the mountain side of lonely fiords, where the silence is so intense that a stone rolling down and dropping into the water echoes like thunder.”

“He went on like this for some time, until I said: ‘You seem to have studied it very carefully.’

“Perhaps I have,” he answered. “I am deeply interested in the life of the sea — few more so. Are you a stranger in New South Wales?”

“Quite a stranger,” I replied. “I only arrived in Australia a few days since.”

“Indeed! Then you have to make the acquaintance of many entrancing beauties yet. Forgive my impertinence, but if you are on a tour, let me recommend you to see the islands before you return home.”

“The South-Sea Islands, I presume you mean?” I said.

“Yes; the bewitching islands of the Southern Seas! The most entrancingly beautiful spots on God’s beautiful earth! See them before you go. They will amply repay any trouble it may cost you to reach them.”

“I should like to see them very much,” I answered.

“Perhaps you are interested in them already?” he continued.

“Very much indeed,” I replied.

“Then, in that case, I may not be considered presumptuous if I offer to assist you. I am an old South-Sea merchant myself, and I have amassed a large collection of beautiful objects from the islands. If you would allow me the pleasure I should be delighted to show them to you.”

“I should like to see them very much indeed,” I answered, thinking it extremely civil of him.

“If you have time we might perhaps go and over-haul them now. My house is but a short distance from the Domain,

and my carriage is waiting at the gates.'

"I shall be delighted,' I said, thinking there could be no possible harm in my accepting his invitation.

"But before we go, may I be allowed to introduce myself?' the old gentleman said, taking a card-case from his pocket and withdrawing a card. This he handed to me, and on it I read —

'Mr. Mathew Draper.'

"I am afraid I have no card to offer you in return,' I said; 'but I am the Marquis of Beckenham.'

"Indeed! Then I am doubly honoured,' the old gentleman said, with a low bow. 'Now shall we wend our way up towards my carriage?'

"We did so, chatting as we went. At the gates a neat brougham was waiting for us, and in it we took our places. "Home,' cried my host, and forthwith we set off down the street. Up one thoroughfare and down another we passed, until I lost all count of our direction. Throughout the drive my companion talked away in his best style; commented on the architecture of the houses, had many queer stories to tell of the passers-by, and in many other ways kept my attention engaged till the carriage came to a standstill before a small but pretty villa in a quiet street.

"Mr. Draper immediately alighted, and when I had done so, dismissed his coachman, who drove away as we passed through the little garden and approached the dwelling. The front door was opened by a dignified man-servant, and we entered. The hall, which was a spacious one for so small a dwelling, was filled with curios and weapons, but I had small time for observing them, as my host led me towards a room at the back. As we entered it he said 'I make you welcome to my house, my lord. I hope, now that you have taken the trouble to come, I shall be able to show you something that will repay your visit.' Thereupon, bidding me seat myself for a few moments, he excused himself and left the room. When he returned he began to do the honours of the apartment. First we examined a rack of Australian spears, nulla-nullas, and boomerangs, then another containing New Zealand hatchets and clubs. After this we crossed to a sort of alcove where reposed in cases a great number of curios collected from the further islands of the Pacific. I was about to take up one of these when the door on the other side of the room opened and some one entered. At first I did not look round, but hearing the new-comer approaching me I turned, to find myself, to my horrified surprise, face to face *with Dr. Nikola*. He was dressed entirely in black, his coat was buttoned and displayed all the symmetry of his peculiar figure, while his hair seemed blacker and his complexion even paler than before. He had evidently been prepared for my visit, for he held out his hand and greeted me without a sign of astonishment upon his face.

"This is indeed a pleasure, my lord,' he said, still with his hand out-stretched, looking hard at me with his peculiar cat-like eyes. 'I did not expect to see you again so soon. And you are evidently a little surprised at meeting me.'

"I am more than surprised,' I answered bitterly. 'I am horribly mortified and angry.'

"Mr. Draper said nothing, but Dr. Nikola dropped into a chair and spoke for him.

"You must not blame my old friend Draper,' he said suavely. 'We have been wondering for the last twenty-four hours how we might best get hold of you, and the means we have employed so successfully seemed the only possible way. Have no fear, my lord, you shall not be hurt. In less than twenty-four hours you will enjoy the society of your energetic friend Mr. Hatteras again.'

"What is your reason for abducting me like this?' I asked. 'You are foolish to do so, for Mr. Hatteras will leave no stone unturned to find me.'

"I do not doubt that at all,' said Dr. Nikola quietly; 'but I think Mr. Hatteras will find he will have all his work cut out for him this time.'

"If you imagine that your plans are not known in Sydney you are mistaken,' I cried. 'The farce you are playing at Government House is detected, and Mr. Hatteras, directly he finds I am lost, will go to Lord Amberley, and reveal everything.'

"I have not the slightest objection,' returned Dr. Nikola quietly. 'By the time Mr. Hatteras can take those steps — indeed, by the time he discovers your absence at all — we shall be beyond his reach.'

"I could not follow his meaning, of course, but while he had been speaking I had been looking stealthily round me for a means of escape. The only way out of the room was, of course, by the door, but both Nikola and his ally were between me and that. Then a big stone hatchet hanging on the wall near me caught my eye. Hardly had I seen it before an idea flashed

through my brain. Supposing I seized it and fought my way out. The door of the room stood open, and I noticed with delight that the key was in the lock on the outside. One rush, armed with the big hatchet, would take me into the passage; then before my foes could recover their wits I might be able to turn the key, and, having locked them in, make my escape from the house.

“Without another thought I made up my mind, sprang to the wall, wrenched down the hatchet, and prepared for my rush. But by the time I had done it both Nikola and Draper were on their feet.

“‘Out of my way!’ I cried, raising my awful weapon aloft. ‘Stop me at your peril!’

“With my hatchet in the air I looked at Nikola. He was standing rigidly erect, with one arm out-stretched, the hand pointing at me. His eyes glared like living coals, and when he spoke his voice came from between his teeth like a serpent’s hiss.

“‘Put down that axe!’ he said.

“With that the old horrible fear of him which had seized me on board ship came over me again. His eyes fascinated me so that I could not look away from them. I put down the hatchet without another thought. Still he gazed at me in the same hideous fashion.

“‘Sit down in that chair,’ he said quietly. ‘You cannot disobey me.’ And indeed I could not. My heart was throbbing painfully, and an awful dizziness was creeping over me. Still I could not get away from those terrible eyes. They seemed to be growing larger and fiercer every moment. Oh! I can feel the horror of them even now. As I gazed his white right hand was moving to and fro before me with regular sweeps, and with each one I felt my own will growing weaker and weaker. That I was being mesmerized, I had no doubt, but if I had been going to be murdered I could not have moved a finger to save myself.

“Then there came a sudden but imperative knock at the door, and both Nikola and Draper rose. Next moment the man whom we had noticed in the train as we came up from Melbourne, and against whom you, Mr. Hatteras, had warned me in Sydney, entered the room. He crossed and stood respectfully before Nikola.

“‘Well, Mr. Eastover, what news?’ asked the latter. ‘Have you done what I told you?’

“‘Everything,’ the man answered, taking an envelope from his pocket. ‘Here is the letter you wanted.’

“Nikola took it from his subordinate’s hand, broke the seal, and having withdrawn the contents, read it carefully. All this time, seeing resistance was quite useless, I did not move. I felt too sick and giddy for anything. When he had finished his correspondence Nikola said something in an undertone to Draper, who immediately left the room. During the time he was absent none of us spoke. Presently he returned, bringing with him a wine glass filled with water, which he presented to Nikola.

“‘Thank you,’ said that gentleman, feeling in his waistcoat pocket. Presently he found what he wanted and produced what looked like a small silver scent-bottle. Unscrewing the top, he poured from it into the wine glass a few drops of some dark-coloured liquid. Having done this he smelt it carefully and then handed it to me. ‘I must ask you to drink this, my lord,’ he said. ‘You need have no fear of the result: it is perfectly harmless.’

“‘Did ever man hear such a cool proposition? Very naturally I declined to do as he wished.

“‘You *must* drink it!’ he reiterated. ‘Pray do so at once. I have no time to waste bandying words.’

“‘I will not drink it!’ I cried, rising to my feet, and prepared to make a fight for it if need should be.

“Once more those eyes grew terrible, and once more that hand began to make the passes before my face. Again I felt the dizziness stealing over me. His will was growing every moment too strong for me. I could not resist him. So when he once more said, ‘Drink!’ I took the glass and did as I was ordered. After that I remember seeing Nikola, Draper, and the man they called Eastover engaged in earnest conversation on the other side of the room. I remember Nikola crossing to where I sat and gazing steadfastly into my face, and after that I recollect no more until I came to my senses in this room, to find myself bound and gagged. For what seemed like hours I lay in agony, then I heard footsteps in the verandah, and next moment the sound of voices. I tried to call for help, but could utter no words. I thought you would go away without discovering me, but fortunately for me you did not do so. Now, Mr. Hatteras, I have told you everything.”

For some time after the Marquis had concluded his strange story both the Inspector and I sat in deep thought. That Beckenham had been kidnapped in order that he should be out of the way while the villainous plot for abducting Phyllis

was being enacted there could be no doubt. But why had he been chosen? and what clues were we to gather from what he had told us? I turned to the Inspector and said —

“What do you think will be the best course for us to pursue now?”

“I have been wondering myself. I think, as there is nothing to be learned from this house, the better plan would be for you two gentlemen to go back to Mr. Wetherell, while I return to the detective office and see if anything has been discovered by the men there. As soon as I have found out I will join you at Potts Point. What do you think?”

I agreed that it would be the best course; so, taking the Marquis by the arms (for he was still too weak to walk alone), we left the house, and were about to step into the street when I stopped, and asking them to wait for me ran back into the room again. In the corner, just as it had been thrown down, lay the rope with which Beckenham had been bound and the pad which had been fitted over his mouth. I picked both up and carried them into the verandah.

“Come here, Mr. Inspector,” I cried. “I thought I should learn something from this. Look at this rope and this pad, and tell me what you make of them.”

He took each up in turn and looked them over and over. But he only shook his head.

“I don’t see anything to guide us,” he said.

“Don’t you?” I cried. “Why, they tell me more than I have learnt from anything else I’ve seen. Look at the two ends of this. They’re seized!”

I looked triumphantly at him, but he only stared at me in surprise, and said, “What do you mean by ‘seized’?”

“Why, I mean that the ends are bound up in this way — look for yourself. Now not one landsman in a hundred *seizes* a rope’s end. This line was taken from some ship in the harbour, and — By Jove! here’s another discovery!”

“What now?” he cried, being by this time almost as excited as I was myself.

“Why, look here,” I said, holding the middle of the rope up to the light, so that we could get a better view of it. “Not very many hours ago this rope was running through a block, and that block was an uncommon one.”

“How do you know that it was an uncommon one?”

“Because it has been newly painted, and what’s funnier still, painted green, of all other colours. Look at this streak of paint along the line; see how it’s smudged. Now, let’s review the case as we walk along.”

So saying, with the Marquis between us, we set off down the street, hoping to be able to pick up a cab.

“First and foremost,” I said, “remember old Draper’s talk of the South Seas — remember the collection of curios he possessed. Probably he owns a schooner, and it’s more than probable that this line and this bit of canvas came from it.”

“I see what you’re driving at,” said the Inspector. “It’s worth considering. Directly I get to the office I will set men to work to try and find this mysterious gentleman. You would know him again, my lord?”

“I should know him anywhere,” was Beckenham’s immediate reply.

“And have you any idea at all where this house, to which he conducted you, is located?”

“None at all. I only know that it was about half-way down a street of which all the houses, save the one at the corner — which was a grocer’s shop — were one-storied villas.”

“Nothing a little more definite, I suppose?”

“Stay! I remember that there was an empty house with broken windows almost opposite, and that on either side of the steps leading up to the front door were two stone eagles with out-stretched wings. The head of one of the eagles — the left, I think — was missing.”

The Inspector noted these things in his pocket-book, and just as he had finished we picked up a cab and called it to the side walk. When we had got in and given the driver Mr. Wetherell’s address, I said to the Inspector — “What are you going to do first?”

“Put some men on to find Mr. Draper, and some more to find a schooner with her blocks newly painted green.”

“You won’t be long in letting us know what you discover?” I said. “Remember how anxious we are.”

“You may count on my coming to you at once with any news I may procure,” he answered.

A few moments later we drew up at Mr. Wetherell’s door. Bidding the Inspector good-bye we went up the steps and rang the bell. By the time the cab was out in the street again we were in the house making our way, behind the butler, to

Mr. Wetherell's study.

The old gentleman had not gone to bed, but sat just as I had left him so many hours before. As soon as we were announced he rose to receive us.

"Thank God, Mr. Hatteras, you have come back!" he said. "I have been in a perfect fever waiting for you. What have you to report?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid," I answered. "But first let me have the pleasure of introducing the real Marquis of Beckenham to you, whom we have had the good fortune to find and rescue."

Mr. Wetherell bowed gravely and held out his hand.

"My lord," he said, "I am thankful that you have been discovered. I look upon it as one step towards the recovery of my poor girl. I hope now that both you and Mr. Hatteras will take up your abode with me during the remainder of your stay in the colony. You have had a scurvy welcome to New South Wales. We must see if we can't make up to you for it. But you look thoroughly worn out; I expect you would like to go to bed."

He rang the bell, and when his butler appeared, gave him some instructions about preparing rooms for us.

Ten minutes later the man returned and stated that our rooms were ready, whereupon Mr. Wetherell himself conducted Beckenham to the apartment assigned to him. When he returned to me, he asked if I would not like to retire too, but I would not hear of it. I could not have slept a wink, so great was my anxiety. Seeing this, he seated himself and listened attentively while I gave him an outline of Beckenham's story. I had hardly finished before I heard a carriage roll up to the door. There was a ring at the bell, and presently the butler, who, like ourselves, had not dreamt of going to bed, though his master had repeatedly urged him to do so, entered and announced the Inspector.

Wetherell hobbled across to receive him with an anxious face. "Have you any better tidings for me?" he asked.

"Not very much, I'm afraid, sir," the Inspector said, shaking his head. "The best I have to tell you is that your carriage and horse have been found in the yard of an empty house off Pitt Street."

"Have you been able to discover any clue as to who put them there?"

"Not one! The horse was found out of the shafts tied to the wall. There was not a soul about the place."

Wetherell sat down again and covered his face with his hands. At that instant the telephone bell in the corner of the room rang sharply. I jumped up and went across to it. Placing the receivers to my ears, I heard a small voice say, "Is that Mr. Wetherell's house, Potts Point?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Who is speaking?"

"Mr. Hatteras. Mr. Wetherell, however, is in the room. Who are you?"

"Detective officer. Will you tell Mr. Wetherell that Mr. Draper's house has been discovered?"

I communicated the message to Mr. Wetherell, and then the Inspector joined me at the instrument and spoke. "Where is the house?" he inquired.

"83, Charlemagne Street — north side."

"Very good. Inspector Murdkin speaking. Let plain clothes men be stationed at either end of the street, and tell them to be on the look out for Draper, and to wait for me. I'll start for the house at once."

He rang off and then turned to me.

"Are you too tired to come with me, Mr. Hatteras?" he inquired.

"Of course not," I answered. "Let us go at once."

"God bless you!" said Wetherell. "I hope you may catch the fellow."

Bidding him good-bye, we went downstairs again, and jumped into the cab, which was directed to the street in question.

Though it was a good distance from our starting-point, in less than half an hour we had pulled up at the corner. As the cab stopped, a tall man, dressed in blue serge, who had been standing near the lamp-post, came forward and touched his hat.

"Good-morning, Williams," said the Inspector. "Any sign of our man?"

"Not one, sir. He hasn't come down the street since I've been here."

"Very good. Now come along and we'll pay the house a visit."

So saying he told the cabman to follow us slowly, and we proceeded down the street. About half-way along he stopped and pointed to a house on the opposite side.

"That is the house his lordship mentioned, with the broken windows, and this is where Mr. Draper dwells, if I am not much mistaken — see the eagles are on either side of the steps, just as described."

It was exactly as Beckenham had told us, even to the extent of the headless eagle on the left of the walk. It was a pretty little place, and evidently still occupied, as a maid was busily engaged cleaning the steps.

Pushing open the gate, the Inspector entered the little garden and accosted the girl.

"Good-morning," he said politely. "Pray, is your master at home?"

"Yes, sir; he's at breakfast just now."

"Well, would you mind telling him that two gentlemen would like to see him?"

"Yes, sir."

The girl rose to her feet, and, wiping her hands on her apron, led the way into the house. We followed close behind her. Then, asking us to wait a moment where we were, she knocked at a door on the right, and opening it, disappeared within.

"Now," said the Inspector, "our man will probably appear, and we shall have him nicely."

The Inspector had scarcely spoken before the door opened again, and a man came out. To our surprise, however, he was very tall and stout, with a round, jovial face, and a decided air of being satisfied with himself and the world in general.

"To what do I owe the honour of this visit?" he said, looking at the Inspector.

"I am an Inspector of Police, as you see," answered my companion, "and we are looking for a man named Draper, who yesterday was in possession of this house."

"I am afraid you have made some little mistake," returned the other. "I am the occupier of this house, and have been for some months past. No Mr. Draper has anything at all to do with it."

The Inspector's face was a study for perfect bewilderment. Nor could mine have been much behind it. The Marquis had given such a minute description of the dwelling opposite and the two stone birds on the steps, that there could be no room for doubt that this *was* the house. And yet it was physically impossible that this man could be Draper; and, if it were the place where Beckenham had been drugged, why were the weapons, etc., he had described not in the hall?

"I cannot understand it at all," said the Inspector, turning to me. "This is the house, and yet where are the things with which it ought to be furnished?"

"You have a description of the furniture, then?" said the owner. "That is good, for it will enable me to prove to you even more clearly that you are mistaken. Pray come and see my sitting-rooms for yourselves."

He led the way into the apartment from which he had been summoned, and we followed him. It was small and nicely furnished, but not a South-Sea curio or native weapon was to be seen in it. Then we followed him to the corresponding room at the back of the house. This was upholstered in the latest fashion; but again there was no sign of what Beckenham had led us to expect we should find. We were completely nonplussed.

"I am afraid we have troubled you without cause," said the Inspector, as we passed out into the hall again.

"Don't mention it," the owner answered; "I find my compensation in the knowledge that I am not involved in any police unpleasantness."

"By the way," said the Inspector suddenly, "have you any idea who your neighbours may be?"

"Oh, dear, yes!" the man replied. "On my right I have a frigidly respectable widow of Low Church tendencies. On my left, the Chief Teller of the Bank of New Holland."

"In that case we can only apologize for our intrusion and wish you good-morning."

"Pray don't apologize. I should have been glad to have assisted you. Good-morning."

We went down the steps again and out into the street. As we passed through the gate, the Inspector stopped and examined a mark on the right-hand post. Then he stooped and picked up what looked like a pebble. Having done so we resumed our walk.

"What on earth can be the meaning of it all?" I asked. "Can his lordship have made a mistake?"

"No, I think not. We have been cleverly duped, that's all."

"What makes you think so?"

"I didn't think so until we passed through the gate on our way out. Now I'm certain of it. Come across the street."

I followed him across the road to a small plain-looking house, with a neatly-curtained bow window and a brass plate on the front door. From the latter I discovered that the proprietress of the place was a dressmaker, but I was completely at a loss to understand why we were visiting her. As soon as the door was opened the Inspector asked if Miss Tiffins were at home, and, on being told that she was, inquired if we might see her. The maid went away to find out, and presently returned and begged us to follow her. We did so down a small passage towards the door of the room which contained the bow window.

Miss Tiffins bade us be seated, and then asked in what way she could be of service to us.

"In the first place, madam," said the Inspector, "a serious crime has been perpetrated, and I have reason to believe that it may be in your power to give us a clue to the persons who committed it."

"You frighten me, sir," replied the lady. "I cannot at all see in what way I can help you. I lead a life of the greatest quietness."

"I do not wish to imply that you do know anything of them. I only want you to carry your memory back as far as yesterday, and to answer me the few simple questions I may ask you."

"I will answer them to the best of my ability."

"Well, in the first place, may I ask if you remember seeing a brougham drive up to that house opposite about mid-day yesterday?"

"No, I cannot say that I do," the old lady replied after a moment's consideration.

"Do you remember seeing a number of men leave the house during the afternoon?"

"No. If they came out I did not notice them."

"Now, think for one moment, if you please, and tell me what vehicles, if any, you remember seeing stop there."

"Let me try to remember. There was Judge's baker's cart, about three, the milk about five, and a furniture van about half-past six."

"That's just what I want to know. And have you any recollection whose furniture van it was?"

"Yes. I remember reading the name as it turned round. Goddard & James, George Street. I wondered if the tenant was going to move."

The Inspector rose, and I followed his example.

"I am exceedingly obliged to you, Miss Tiffins. You have helped me materially."

"I am glad of that," she answered; "but I trust I shall not be wanted to give evidence in court."

"You need have no fear on that score," the Inspector answered. "Good-day."

When we had left the house the Inspector turned to me and said —

"It was a great piece of luck finding a dressmaker opposite. Commend me to ladies of that profession for knowing what goes on in the street. Now we will visit Messrs. Goddard & James and see who hired the things. Meantime, Williams," (here he called the plain-clothes constable to him), "you had better remain here and watch that house. If the man we saw comes out, follow him, and let me know where he goes."

"Very good, sir," the constable replied, and we left him to his vigil.

Then, hailing a passing cab, we jumped into it and directed the driver to convey us to George Street. By this time it was getting on for mid-day, and we were both worn out. But I was in such a nervous state that I could not remain inactive. Phyllis had been in Nikola's hands nearly fourteen hours, and so far we had not obtained one single definite piece of information as to her whereabouts.

Arriving at the shop of Messrs. Goddard & James, we went inside and asked to see the chief partner. An assistant immediately conveyed us to an office at the rear of the building, where we found an elderly gentleman writing at a desk. He looked up as we entered, and then, seeing the Inspector's uniform, rose and asked our business.

"The day before yesterday," began my companion, "you supplied a gentleman with a number of South-Sea weapons and curios on hire, did you not?"

"I remember doing so — yes," was the old gentleman's answer. "What about it?"

"Only I should be glad if you would favour me with a description of the person who called upon you about them — or a glimpse of his letter, if he wrote."

"He called and saw me personally."

"Ah! That is good. Now would you be so kind as to describe him?"

"Well, in the first place, he was very tall and rather handsome; he had, if I remember rightly, a long brown moustache, and was decidedly well dressed."

"That doesn't tell us very much, does it? Was he alone?"

"No. He had with him, when he came into the office, an individual whose face remains fixed in my memory — indeed I cannot get it out of my head."

Instantly I became all excitement.

"What was this second person like?" I asked.

"Well, I can hardly tell you — that is to say, I can hardly give you a good enough description of him to make you see him as I saw him. He was tall and yet very slim, had black hair, a sallow complexion, and the blackest eyes I ever saw in a man. He was clean-shaven and exquisitely dressed, and when he spoke, his teeth glittered like so many pearls. I never saw another man like him in my life."

"Nikola, for a thousand!" I cried, bringing my hand down with a thump upon the table.

"It looks as if we're on the track at last," said the Inspector. Then, turning to Mr. Goddard again: "And may I ask now what excuse they made to you for wanting these things!"

"They did not offer any; they simply paid a certain sum down for the hire of them, gave me their address, and then left."

"And the address was?"

"83, Charlemagne Street. Our van took the things there and fetched them away last night."

"Thank you. And now one or two other questions. What name did the hirer give?"

"Eastover."

"When they left your shop how did they go away?"

"A cab was waiting at the door for them, and I walked out to it with them."

"There were only two of them, you think?"

"No. There was a third person waiting for them in the cab, and it was that very circumstance which made me anxious to have my things brought back as soon as possible. If I had been able to, I should have even declined to let them go."

"Why so?"

"Well, to tell you that would involve a story. But perhaps I had better tell you. It was in this way. About three years ago, through a distant relative, I got to know a man named Draper."

"Draper!" I cried. "You don't mean — but there, I beg your pardon. Pray go on."

"As I say, I got to know this man Draper, who was a South-Sea trader. We met once or twice, and then grew more intimate. So friendly did we at last become, that I even went so far as to put some money into a scheme he proposed to me. It was a total failure. Draper proved a perfect fraud and a most unbusiness-like person, and all I got out of the transaction was the cases of curios and weapons which this man Eastover hired from me. It was because — when I went out with my customers to their cab — I saw this man Draper waiting for them that I became uneasy about my things. However, all's well that ends well, and as they returned my goods and paid the hire I must not grumble."

"And now tell me what you know of Draper's present life," the Inspector said.

"Ah! I'm afraid of that I can tell you but little. He has been twice declared bankrupt, and the last time there was some fuss made over his schooner, the *Merry Duchess*."

"He possesses a schooner, then?"

"Oh, yes! A nice boat. She's in harbour now."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Goddard. I am obliged to you for your assistance in this matter."

"Don't mention it. I hope that what I have told you may prove of service to you."

"I'm sure it will. Good-day."

"Good-day, gentlemen."

He accompanied us to the door, and then bade us farewell. "Now what are we to do?" I asked.

"Well, first, I am going back to the office to put a man on to find this schooner, and then I'm going to take an hour or two's rest. By that time we shall know enough to be able to lay our hands on Dr. Nikola and his victim, I hope."

"God grant we may!"

"Where are you going now?"

"Back to Potts Point," I answered.

We thereupon bade each other farewell and set off in different directions.

When I reached Mr. Wetherell's house I learned from the butler that his master had fallen asleep in the library. Not wishing to disturb him, I inquired the whereabouts of my own bedroom, and on being conducted to it, laid myself down fully dressed upon the bed. So utterly worn out was I, that my head had no sooner touched the pillow than I was fast asleep. How long I lay there I do not know, but when I woke it was to find Mr. Wetherell standing beside me, holding a letter in his hand. He was white as a sheet, and trembling in every limb. "Read this, Mr. Hatteras," he cried. "For Heaven's sake tell me what we are to do!"

I sat up on the side of the bed and read the letter he handed to me. It was written in what was evidently a disguised hand, on common note-paper, and ran:—

"To Mr. Wetherell,

"Potts Point, Sydney

"Dear Sir,

"This is to inform you that your daughter is in very safe keeping. If you wish to find her you had better be quick about it. What's more, you had better give up consulting the police, and such like, in the hope of getting hold of her. The only way you *can* get her will be to act as follows: At eight o'clock to-night charter a boat and pull down the harbour as far as Shark Point. When you get there, light your pipe three times, and some one in a boat near by will do the same. Be sure to bring with you the sum of *one hundred thousand pounds in gold, and — this is most important — bring with you the little stick you got from China Pete, or do not come at all.* Above all, do not bring more than one man. If you do not put in an appearance you will not hear of your daughter again.

Yours obediently,

"The Man who Knows."



CHAPTER 13

FOLLOWING UP A CLUE

For some moments after I had perused the curious epistle Mr. Wetherell had brought to my room I remained wrapped in thought.

“What do you make of it?” my companion asked.

“I don’t know what to say,” I answered, looking at it again. “One thing, however, is quite certain, and that is that, despite its curious wording, it is intended you should take it seriously.”

“You think so?”

“I do indeed. But I think when the Inspector arrives it would be just as well to show it to him. What do you say?”

“I agree with you. Let us defer consideration of it until we see him.”

When, an hour later, the Inspector put in an appearance, the letter was accordingly placed before him, and his opinion asked concerning it. He read it through without comment, carefully examined the writing and signature, and finally held it up to the light. Having done this he turned to me and said:

“Have you that envelope we found at the *Canary Bird*, Mr. Hatteras?”

I took it out of my pocket and handed it to him. He then placed it on the table side by side with the letter, and through a magnifying-glass scrutinized both carefully. Having done so, he asked for the envelope in which it had arrived. Mr. Wetherell had thrown it into the waste-paper basket, but a moment’s search brought it to light. Again he scrutinized both the first envelope and the letter, and then compared them with the second cover. “Yes, I thought so,” he said. “This letter was written either by Nikola, or at his desire. The paper is the same as that he purchased at the stationer’s shop we visited.”

“And what had we better do now?” queried Wetherell, who had been eagerly waiting for his opinion.

“We must think,” said the Inspector. “In the first place, I suppose you don’t feel inclined to pay the large sum mentioned here?”

“Not if I can help it, of course,” answered Wetherell. “But if the worst comes to the worst, and I cannot rescue my poor girl any other way, I would sacrifice even more than that.”

“Well, we’ll see if we can find her without compelling you to pay anything at all,” the Inspector cried. “I’ve got an idea in my head.”

“And what is that?” I cried; for I, too, had been thinking out a plan.

“Well, first and foremost,” he answered, “I want you, Mr. Wetherell, to tell me all you can about your servants. Let us begin with the butler. How long has he been with you?”

“Nearly twenty years.”

“A good and trustworthy servant, I presume?”

“To the last degree. I have implicit confidence in him.”

“Then we may dismiss him from our minds. I think I saw a footman in the hall. How long has he been with you?”

“Just about three months.”

“And what sort of a fellow is he?”

“I really could not tell you very much. He seems intelligent, quick and willing, and up to his work.”

“Is your cook a man or a woman?”

“A woman. She has been with me since before my wife’s death — that is to say, nearly ten years. You need have no suspicion of her.”

“Housemaids?”

“Two. Both have been with me some time, and seem steady, respectable girls. There is also a kitchen maid; but she has

been with me nearly as long as my cook, and I would stake my reputation on her integrity."

"Well, in that case, the only person who seems at all suspicious is the footman. May we have him up?"

"With pleasure. I'll ring for him."

Mr. Wetherell rang the bell, and a moment later it was answered by the man himself.

"Come in, James, and shut the door behind you," his master said.

The man did as he was ordered, but not without looking, as I thought, a little uncomfortable. The Inspector I could see had noticed this too, for he had been watching him intently ever since he had appeared in the room.

"James," said Mr. Wetherell, "the Inspector of Police wishes to ask you a few questions. Answer him to the best of your ability."

"To begin with," said the Inspector, "I want you to look at this envelope. Have you seen it before?"

He handed him the envelope of the anonymous letter addressed to Mr. Wetherell. The man took it and turned it over in his hands.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I have seen it before; I took it in at the front door."

"From whom?"

"From a little old woman, sir," the man answered.

"A little old woman!" cried the Inspector, evidently surprised. "What sort of woman?"

"Well, sir, I don't know that I can give you much of a description of her. She was very small, had a sort of nut-cracker face, a little black poke bonnet, and walked with a stick."

"Should you know her again if you saw her?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Did she say anything when she gave you the letter?"

"Only, 'For Mr. Wetherell, young man.' That was all, sir."

"And you didn't ask if there was an answer? That was rather a singular omission on your part, was it not?"

"She didn't give me time, sir. She just put it into my hand and went down the steps again."

"That will do. Now, Mr. Wetherell, I think we'd better see about getting that money from the bank. You need not wait, my man."

The footman thereupon left the room, while both Mr. Wetherell and I stared at the Inspector in complete astonishment. He laughed.

"You are wondering why I said that," he remarked.

"I must confess it struck me as curious."

"Well, let me tell you I did it with a purpose. Did you notice that young man's face when he entered the room and when I gave him the letter? There can be no doubt about it, he is in the secret."

"You mean that he is in Nikola's employ? Then why don't you arrest him?"

"Because I want to be quite certain first. I said that about the money because, if he is Nikola's agent, he will carry the information to him, and by so doing keep your daughter in Sydney for at least a day longer. Do you see?"

"I do, and I admire your diplomacy. Now what is your plan?"

"May I first tell mine?" I said.

"Do," said the Inspector, "for mine is not quite matured yet."

"Well," I said, "my idea is this. I propose that Mr. Wetherell shall obtain from his bank a number of gold bags, fill them with lead discs to represent coin, and let it leak out before this man that he has got the money in the house. Then to-night Mr. Wetherell will set off for the water-side. I will row him down the harbour disguised as a boatman. We will pick up the boat, as arranged in that letter. In the meantime you must start from the other side in a police boat, pull up to meet us, and arrest the man. Then we will force him to disclose Miss Wetherell's whereabouts, and act upon his information. What do you say?"

"It certainly sound feasible," said the Inspector, and Mr. Wetherell nodded his head approvingly. At that moment the

Marquis entered the room, looking much better than when we had found him on the preceding night, and the conversation branched off into a different channel.

My plot seemed to commend itself so much to Mr. Wetherell's judgment, that he ordered his carriage and drove off there and then to his bank, while I went down to the harbour, arranged about a boat, and having done so, proceeded up to the town, where I purchased a false beard, an old dungaree suit, such as a man loafing about the harbour might wear, and a slouch hat of villainous appearance. By the time I got back to the house Mr. Wetherell had returned. With great delight he conducted me to his study, and, opening his safe, showed me a number of canvas bags, on each of which was printed £1,000.

"But surely there are not £100,000 there?"

"No," said the old gentleman with a chuckle. "There is the counterfeit of £50,000 there; for the rest I propose to show him these."

So saying, he dived his hand into a drawer and produced a sheaf of crisp bank-notes.

"There — these are notes for the balance of the amount."

"But you surely are not going to pay? I thought we were going to try to catch the rascals without letting any money change hands."

"So we are, do not be afraid. If you will only glance at these notes you will see that they are dummies, every one of them. They are for me to exhibit to the man in the boat; in the dark they'll pass muster, never fear."

"Very good indeed," I said with a laugh. "By the time they can be properly examined we shall have the police at hand ready to capture him."

"I believe we shall," the old gentleman cried, rubbing his hands together in delight — "I believe we shall. And a nice example we'll make of the rascals. Nikola thinks he can beat me; I'll show him how mistaken he is!"

And for some time the old gentleman continued in this strain, confidently believing that he would have his daughter with him again by the time morning came. Nor was I far behind him in confidence. Since Nikola had not spirited her out of the country my plot seemed the one of all others to enable us to regain possession of her; and not only that, but we hoped it would give us an opportunity of punishing those who had so schemed against her. Suddenly an idea was born in my brain, and instantly I acted on it.

"Mr. Wetherell," I said, "supposing, when your daughter is safe again, I presume so far as once more to offer myself for your son-in-law, what will you say?"

"What will I say?" he cried. "Why, I will tell you that you shall have her, my boy, with ten thousand blessings on your head. I know you now; and since I've treated you so badly, and you've taken such a noble revenge, why, I'll make it up to you, or my name's not Wetherell. But we won't talk any more about that till we have got possession of her; we have other and more important things to think of. What time ought we to start to-night?"

"The letter fixes the meeting for ten o'clock; we had better be in the boat by half-past nine. In the meantime I should advise you to take a little rest. By the way, do you think your footman realizes that you have the money?"

"He ought to, for he carried it up to this room for me; and, what's more, he has applied for a holiday this afternoon."

"That's to carry the information. Very good; everything is working excellently. Now I'm off to rest for a little while."

"I'll follow your example. In the meantime I'll give orders for an early dinner."

We dined at seven o'clock sharp, and at half-past eight I went off to my room to don my disguise; then, bidding the Marquis good-bye — much to the young gentleman's disgust, for he was most anxious to accompany us — I slipped quietly out of my window, crossed the garden — I hoped unobserved — and then went down to the harbour side, where the boat I had chartered was waiting for me. A quarter of an hour later Wetherell's carriage drove up, and on seeing it I went across and opened the door. My disguise was so perfect that for a moment the old gentleman seemed undecided whether to trust me or not. But my voice, when I spoke, reassured him, and then we set to work carrying the bags of spurious money down to the boat. As soon as this was accomplished we stepped in. I seated myself amid-ships and got out the oars, Mr. Wetherell taking the yoke-lines in the stern. Then we shoved off, and made our way out into the harbour.

It was a dull, cloudy night, with hardly a sign of a star in the whole length and breadth of heaven, while every few minutes a cold, cheerless wind swept across the water. So chilly indeed was it that before we had gone very far I began to

wish I had added an overcoat to my other disguises. We hardly spoke, but pulled slowly down towards the island mentioned in the letter. The strain on our nerves was intense, and I must confess to feeling decidedly nervous as I wondered what would happen if the police boat did not pull up to meet us, as we had that morning arranged.

A quarter to ten chimed from some church ashore as we approached within a hundred yards of our destination. Then I rested on my oars and waited. All round us were the lights of bigger craft, but no rowing-boat could I see. About five minutes before the hour I whispered to Wetherell to make ready, and in answer the old gentleman took a matchbox from his pocket. Exactly as the town clocks struck the hour he lit a vesta; it flared a little and then went out. As it did so a boat shot out of the darkness to port. He struck a second, and then a third. As the last one burned up and then died away, the man rowing the boat I have just referred to struck a light, then another, then another, in rapid succession. Having finished his display, he took up his oars and propelled his boat towards us. When he was within talking distance he said in a gruff voice:

“Is Mr. Wetherell aboard?”

To this my companion immediately answered, with a tremble in his voice, “Yes, here I am!”

“Money all right?”

“Can you see if I hold it up?” asked Mr. Wetherell. As he spoke a long, black boat came into view on the other side of our questioner, and pulled slowly towards him. It was the police boat.

“No, I don’t want to see,” said the voice again. “But this is the message I was to give you. Pull in towards Circular Quay and find the *Maid of the Mist* barque. Go aboard her, and take your money down into the cuddy. There you’ll get your answer.”

“Nothing more?” cried Mr. Wetherell.

“That’s all I was told,” answered the man, and then said, “Good-night.”

At the same moment the police boat pulled up alongside him and made fast. I saw a dark figure enter his boat, and next moment the glare of a lantern fell upon the man’s face. I picked up my oars and pulled over to them, getting there just in time to hear the Inspector ask the man his name.

“James Burbidge,” was the reply. “I don’t know as how you’ve got anything against me. I’m a licensed waterman, I am.”

“Very likely,” said the Inspector; “but I want a little explanation from you. How do you come to be mixed up in this business?”

“What — about this ’ere message, d’you mean?”

“Yes, about this message. Where is it from? Who gave it to you?”

“Well, if you’ll let me go, I’ll tell you all about it,” growled the man. “I was up at the *Hen and Chickens* this evenin’, just afore dark, takin’ a nobbler along with a friend. Presently in comes a cove in a cloak. He beckons me outside and says, ‘Do you want to earn a sufring?’ — a sufring is twenty bob. So I says, ‘My word, I do!’ Then he says, ‘Well, you go out on the harbour to-night, and be down agin Shark Point at ten?’ I said I would, and so I was. ‘You’ll see a boat there with an old gent in it,’ says he. ‘He’ll strike three matches, and you do the same. Then ask him if he’s Mr. Wetherell. If he says “Yes,” ask him if the money’s all right? And if he says “Yes” to that, tell him to pull in towards Circular Quay and find the *Maid of the Mist* barque. He’s to take his money down to the cuddy, and he’ll get his answer there.’ That’s the truth so ‘elp me bob! I don’t know what you wants to go arrestin’ of an honest man for.”

The Inspector turned to the water police.

“Does any man here know James Burbidge?”

Two or three voices immediately answered in the affirmative, and this seemed to decide the officer, for he turned to the waterman again and said, “As some of my men seem to know you, I’ll let you off. But for your own sake go home and keep a silent tongue.”

He thereupon clambered back into his own boat and bade the man depart. In less time than it takes to tell he was out of sight. We then drew up alongside the police boat.

“What had we better do, Mr. Inspector?” asked Mr. Wetherell.

“Find the *Maid of the Mist* at once. She’s an untenanted ship, being for sale. You will go aboard, sir, with your

companion, and down to the cuddy. Don't take your money, however. We'll draw up alongside as soon as you're below, and when one of their gang, whom you'll despatch for it, comes up to get the coin, we'll collar him, and then come to your assistance. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. But how are we to know the vessel?"

"Well, the better plan would be for you to follow us. We'll pull to within a hundred yards of her. I learn from one of my men here that she's painted white, so you'll have no difficulty in recognizing her."

"Very well, then, go on, and we'll follow you."

The police boat accordingly set off, and we followed about fifty yards behind her. A thick drizzle was now falling, and it was by no means an easy matter to keep her in sight. For some time we pulled on. Presently we began to get closer to her. In a quarter of an hour we were alongside.

"There's your craft," said the Inspector, pointing as he spoke to a big vessel showing dimly through the scud to starboard of us. "Pull over to her."

I followed his instructions, and, arriving at the vessel's side, hitched on, made the painter fast, and then, having clambered aboard, assisted Mr. Wetherell to do the same. As soon as we had both gained the deck we stood and looked about us, at the same time listening for any sound which might proclaim the presence of the men we had come to meet; but save the sighing of the wind in the shrouds overhead, the dismal creaking of blocks, and the drip of moisture upon the deck, no sign was to be heard. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to make our way below as best we could. Fortunately I had had the forethought to bring with me a small piece of candle, which came in very handily at the present juncture, seeing that the cuddy, when we reached the companion ladder, was wrapt in total darkness. Very carefully I stepped inside, lit the candle, and then, with Mr. Wetherell at my heels, made my way down the steps.

Arriving at the bottom we found ourselves in a fair-sized saloon of the old-fashioned type. Three cabins stood on either side, while from the bottom of the companion ladder, by which we had descended, to a long cushioned locker right aft under the wheel, ran a table covered with American cloth. But there was no man of any kind to be seen. I opened cabin after cabin, and searched each with a like result. We were evidently quite alone in the ship.

"What do you make of it all?" I asked of Mr. Wetherell.

"It looks extremely suspicious," he answered. "Perhaps we're too early for them. But see, Mr. Hatteras, there's something on the table at the farther end."

So there was — something that looked very much like a letter. Together we went round to the end of the table, and there, surely enough, found a letter pinned to the American cloth, and addressed to my companion in a bold but rather quaint handwriting.

"It's for you, Mr. Wetherell," I said, removing the pins and presenting it to him. Thereupon we sat down beside the table, and he broke the seal with trembling fingers. It was not a very long epistle, and ran:—

"My dear Mr. Wetherell —

"Bags of imitation money and spurious bank-notes will not avail you, nor is it politic to arrange that the Water Police should meet you on the harbour for the purpose of arresting me. You have lost your opportunity, and your daughter accordingly leaves Australia to-night. I will, however, give you one more chance — take care that you make the most of it. The sum I now ask is £150,000 *with the stick given you by China Pete*, and must be paid without inquiry of any sort. If you are agreeable to this, advertise as follows, 'I will Pay — W., and give stick!' in the agony column *Sydney Morning Herald*, on the 18th, 19th, and 20th of this present month. Arrangements will then be made with you.

"The Man who Knows."

"Oh, my God, I've ruined all!" cried Mr. Wetherell as he put the letter down on the table; "and — who knows? — I may have killed my poor child!"

Seeing his misery, I did my best to comfort him; but it was no use. He seemed utterly broken down by the failure of our scheme, and, if the truth must be told, my own heart was quite as heavy. One thing was very certain, there was a traitor in our camp. Some one had overheard our plans and carried them elsewhere. Could it be the footman? If so, he should have it made hot for him when I got sufficient proof against him; I could promise him that most certainly. While I was thinking over this, I heard a footstep on the companion stairs, and a moment later the Inspector made his appearance. His

astonishment at finding us alone, reading a letter by the light of one solitary candle, was unmistakable, for he said, as he came towards us and sat down, "Why, how's this? Where are the men?"

"There are none. We've been nicely sold," I answered, handing him the letter. He perused it without further remark, and when he had done so, sat drumming with his fingers upon the table in thought.

"We shall have to look in your own house for the person who has given us away, Mr. Wetherell!" he said at last. "The folk who are running this affair are as cute as men are made nowadays; it's a pleasure to measure swords with them."

"What do you think our next move had better be?"

"Get home as fast as we can. I'll return with you, and we'll talk it over. It's no use our remaining here."

We accordingly went on deck, and descended to our wherry again. This time the Inspector accompanied us, while the police boat set off down the harbour on other business. When we had seen it pull out into the darkness, we threw the imitation money overboard, pushed off for the shore, landed where we had first embarked, and then walked up to Mr. Wetherell's house. It was considerably after twelve o'clock by the time we reached it, but the butler was still sitting up for us. His disappointment seemed as keen as ours when he discovered that we had returned without his young mistress. He followed us up to the study with spirits and glasses, and then at his master's instruction went off to bed.

"Now, gentlemen," began Mr. Wetherell, when the door had closed upon him, "let us discuss the matter thoroughly. But, before we begin, may I offer you cigars?"

The Inspector took one, but I declined, stating that I preferred a pipe. But my pipe was in my bedroom, which was on the other side of the passage; so asking them to wait for me, I went to fetch it. I left the room, shutting the door behind me. But it so happened that the pipe-case had been moved, and it was some minutes before I could find it. Having done so, however, I blew out my candle, and was about to leave the room, which was exactly opposite the study, when I heard the green baize door at the end of the passage open, and a light footstep come along the corridor. Instantly I stood perfectly still, and waited to see who it might be. Closer and closer the step came, till I saw in the half dark the pretty figure of one of the parlour maids. On tip-toe she crept up to the study door, and then stooping down, listened at the keyhole. Instantly I was on the alert, every nerve strained to watch her. For nearly five minutes she stood there, and then with a glance round, tiptoed quietly along the passage again, closing the baize door after her.

When she was safely out of hearing I crossed to the study. Both the Inspector and Mr. Wetherell saw that something had happened, and were going to question me. But I held up my hand.

"Don't ask any questions, but tell me as quickly, and as nearly as you can, what you have been talking about during the last five minutes," I said.

"Why?"

"Don't stop to ask questions. Believe in the importance of my haste. What was it?"

"I have only been giving Mr. Wetherell a notion of the steps I propose to take," said the Inspector.

"Thank you. Now I'm off. Don't sit up for me, Mr. Wetherell; I'm going to follow up a clue that may put us on the right scent at last. I don't think you had better come, Mr. Inspector, but I'll meet you here again at six o'clock."

"You can't explain, I suppose?" said the latter, looking a little huffed.

"I'm afraid not," I answered; "but I'll tell you this much — I saw one of the female servants listening at this door. She'll be off, if I mistake not, with the news she has picked up, and I want to watch her. Good-night."

"Good-night, and good luck to you."

Without another word I slipped off my boots, and carrying them in my hand, left the room, and went downstairs to the morning-room. This apartment looked out over the garden, and possessed a window shaded by a big tree. Opening it, I jumped out and carefully closed it after me. Then, pausing for a moment to resume my boots, I crept quietly down the path, jumped a low wall, and so passed into the back street. About fifty yards from the tradesmen's entrance, but on the opposite side of the road, there was a big Moreton Bay fig-tree. Under this I took my stand, and turned a watchful eye upon the house. It was a dark night, so that it would have been extremely difficult for any one across the way to have detected my presence.

For some minutes I waited, and was beginning to wonder if I could have been deceived, when I heard the soft click of a latch, and next moment a small dark figure passed out into the street, and closed the gate after it. Then, pausing a moment

as if to make up her mind, for the mysterious person was a woman, she set off quickly in the direction of the city. I followed about a hundred yards behind her.

With the exception of one policeman, who stared very hard at me, we did not meet a soul. Once or twice I nearly lost her, and when we reached the city itself I began to see that it would be well for me to decrease the difference that separated us, if I did not wish to bid good-bye to her altogether. I accordingly hastened my steps, and in this fashion we passed up one street and down another, until we reached what I cannot help thinking must have been the lowest quarter of Sydney. On either hand were Chinese names and sign-boards, marine stores, slop shops, with pawnbrokers and public-houses galore; while in this locality few of the inhabitants seemed to have any idea of what bed meant. Groups of sullen-looking men and women were clustered at the corners, and on one occasion the person I was pursuing was stopped by them. But she evidently knew how to take care of herself, for she was soon marching on her way again.

At the end of one long and filthily dirty street she paused and looked about her. I had crossed the road just before this, and was scarcely ten yards behind her. Pulling my hat well down to shade my face, and sticking my hands in my pockets, I staggered and reeled along, doing my best to imitate the gait of a drunken man. Seeing only me about, she went up to the window of a corner house and tapped with her knuckles thrice upon the glass. Before one could have counted twenty the door of the dwelling was opened, and she passed in. Now I was in a nasty fix — either I must be content to abandon my errand, or I must get inside the building, and trust to luck to procure the information I wanted. Fortunately, in my present disguise the girl would be hardly likely to recognize her master's guest. So giving them time to get into a room, I also went up to the door and turned the handle. To my delight it was unlocked. I opened it, and entered the house.

The passage was in total darkness; but I could make out where the door of the room I wanted to find was located by a thin streak of light low down upon the floor. As softly as I possibly could, I crept up to it, and bent down to look through the keyhole. The view was necessarily limited, but I could just make out the girl I had followed sitting upon a bed; while leaning against the wall, a dirty clay pipe in her mouth, was the vilest old woman I have ever in my life set eyes on. She was very small, with a pinched-up nut-cracker face, dressed in an old bit of tawdry finery, more than three sizes too large for her. Her hair fell upon her shoulders in a tangled mass, and from under it her eyes gleamed out like those of a wicked little Scotch terrier ready to bite. As I bent down to listen I heard her say:—

"Well, my pretty dear, and what information have you got for the gentleman, that brings you down at this time of night?"

"Only that the *coppers* are going to start at daylight looking for the *Merry Duchess*. I heard the Inspector say so himself."

"At daylight, are they?" croaked the old hag. "Well, I wish 'em joy of their search, I do — them — them! Any more news, my dear?"

"The master and that long-legged slab of a Hatteras went out to-night down the harbour. The old man brought home a lot of money bags, but what was in 'em was only dummies."

"I know that, too, my dear. Nicely they was sold. Ha! ha!"

She chuckled like an old fiend, and then began to cut up another pipe of tobacco in the palm of her hand like a man. She smoked negro head, and the reek of it came out through the keyhole to me. But the younger woman was evidently impatient, for she rose and said:—

"When do they sail with the girl, Sally?"

"They're gone, my dear. They went at ten to-night."

At this news my heart began to throb painfully.

"They weren't long about it," said the younger girl.

"That Nikola's not long about anything," remarked the old woman.

"I hope Pipa Lannu will agree with her health — the stuck-up minx — I do!" the younger remarked spitefully. "Now where's the money he said I was to have. Give it to me and let me be off. I shall get the sack if this is found out."

"It was five pound I was to give yer, wasn't it?" the elder woman said.

"Ten," said the younger sharply. "No larks, Sally. I know too much for you!"

"Oh, you know a lot, honey, don't you? Of course you'd be expected to know more than old Aunt Sally, who's never

seen anything at all, wouldn't you? Go along with you!"

"Hand me over the money, I say, and let me be off!"

"Of course you do know a lot more, don't you? There's a pound!"

While they were wrangling over the payment I crept down the passage again to the front door. Once I had reached it, I opened it softly and went out, closing it carefully behind me. Then I took to my heels and ran down the street in the direction I had come. Inquiring my way here and there from policemen, I eventually reached home, scaled the wall, and went across the garden to the morning-room window. This I opened, and by its help made my way into the house and upstairs. As I had expected that he would have gone to bed, my astonishment was considerable at meeting Mr. Wetherell on the landing.

"Well, what have you discovered?" he asked anxiously as I came up to him.

"Information of the greatest importance," I answered; "but one other thing first. Call up your housekeeper, and tell her you have reason to believe that one of the maids is not in the house. Warn her not to mention you in the matter, but to discharge the girl before breakfast. By the time you've done that I'll have changed my things and be ready to tell you everything."

"I'll go and rouse her at once; I'm all impatience to know what you have discovered."

He left me and passed through the green baize door to the servants' wing; while I went to my bedroom and changed my things. This done, I passed into the study, where I found a meal awaiting me. To this I did ample justice, for my long walk and the excitement of the evening had given me an unusual appetite.

Just as I was cutting myself a third slice of beef Mr. Wetherell returned, and informed me that the housekeeper was on the alert, and would receive the girl on her reappearance.

"Now tell me of your doings," said the old gentleman.

I thereupon narrated all that had occurred, and when I had finished, he said:—

"Do you believe then that my poor girl has been carried off by Nikola to this island called Pipa Lannu?"

"I do."

"Well, then, what are we to do to rescue her? Shall, I ask the Government to send a gunboat down?"

"If you think it best; but, for my own part, I must own I should act independently of them. You don't want to make a big sensation, I presume; and remember, to arrest Nikola would be to open the whole affair."

"Then what do you propose?"

"I propose," I answered, "that we charter a small schooner, fit her out, select half a dozen trustworthy and silent men, and then take our departure for Pipa Lannu. I am well acquainted with the island, and, what's more, I hold a master's certificate. We would sail in after dark, arm all our party thoroughly, and go ashore. I expect they will be keeping your daughter a prisoner in a hut. If that is so, we will surround it and rescue her without any trouble, and, what is better still, without any public scandal. What do you think?"

"I quite agree with what you say. I think it's an excellent idea; and, while you've been speaking, I too have been thinking of something. There's my old friend McMurtough, who has a nice steam yacht. I'm sure he'd be willing to let us have the use of her."

"Where does he live? — far from here?"

"His office would be best; we'll go over and see him directly after breakfast if you like."

"By all means. Now I think I'll go and take a little nap; I feel quite worn out. When the Inspector arrives you will be able to explain all that has happened; but I think I should ask him to keep a quiet tongue in his head about the island. If it leaks out at all, it may warn them, and they'll be off elsewhere — to a place perhaps where we may not be able to find them."

"I'll remember," said Mr. Wetherell, and thereupon I retired to my room, and, having partially undressed, threw myself upon my bed. In less than two minutes I was fast asleep, never waking until the first gong sounded for breakfast; then, after a good bath, which refreshed me wonderfully, I dressed in my usual habiliments, and went downstairs. Mr. Wetherell and the Marquis were in the dining-room, and when I entered both he and the Marquis, who held a copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in his hand, seemed prodigiously excited.

"I say, Mr. Hatteras," said the latter (after I had said "Good-morning"), "here's an advertisement which is evidently intended for you!"

"What is it about?" I asked. "Who wants to advertise for me?"

"Read for yourself," said the Marquis, giving me the paper.

I took it, and glanced down the column to which he referred me until I came to the following:—

"Richard Hatteras. — If this should meet the eye of Mr. Richard Hatteras, of Thursday Island, Torres Straits, lately returned from England, and believed to be now in Sydney; he is earnestly requested to call at the office of Messrs. Dawson & Gladman, Solicitors, Castlereagh Street, where he will hear of something to his advantage."

There could be no doubt at all that I was the person referred to; but what could be the reason of it all? What was there that I could possibly hear to my advantage, save news of Phyllis, and it would be most unlikely that I would learn anything about the movements of the gang who had abducted her from a firm of first-class solicitors such as I understood Messrs. Dawson & Gladman to be. However, it was no use wondering about it, so I dismissed the matter from my mind for the present, and took my place at the table. In the middle of the meal the butler left the room, in response to a ring at the front door. When he returned, it was to inform me that a man was in the hall, who wished to have a few moments' conversation with me. Asking Mr. Wetherell to excuse me, I left the room.

In the hall I found a seedy-looking individual of about middle age. He bowed, and on learning that my name was Hatteras, asked if he might be permitted five minutes alone with me. In response, I led him to the morning-room, and having closed the door, pointed to a seat. "What is your business?" I inquired, when he had sat down.

"It is rather a curious affair to approach, Mr. Hatteras," the man began. "But to commence, may I be permitted to suggest that you are uneasy in your mind about a person who has disappeared?"

"You may certainly suggest that, if you like," I answered cautiously.

"If it were in a man's power to furnish a clue regarding that person's whereabouts, it might be useful to you, I suppose," he continued, craftily watching me out of the corners of his eyes.

"Very useful," I replied. "Are you in a position to do so?"

"I might possibly be able to afford you some slight assistance," he went on. "That is, of course, provided it were made worth my while."

"What do you call 'worth your while'?"

"Well, shall we say five hundred pounds? That's not a large sum for really trustworthy information. I ought to ask a thousand, considering the danger I'm running in mixing myself up with the affair. Only I'm a father myself, and that's why I do it."

"I see. Well, let me tell you, I consider five hundred too much."

"Well then I'm afraid we can't trade. I'm sorry."

"So am I. But I'm not going to buy a pig in a poke."

"Shall we say four hundred, then?"

"No. Nor three — two, or one. If your information is worth anything, I don't mind giving you fifty pounds for it. But I won't give a halfpenny more."

As I spoke, I rose as if to terminate the interview. Instantly my visitor adopted a different tone.

"My fault is my generosity," he said. "It's the ruin of me. Well, you shall have it for fifty. Give me the money, and I'll tell you."

"By no means," I answered. "I must hear the information first. Trust to my honour. If what you tell me is worth anything, I'll give you fifty pounds for it. Now what is it?"

"Well, sir, to begin with, you must understand that I was standing at the corner of Pitt Street an evening or two back, when two men passed me talking earnestly together. One of 'em was a tall strapping fellow, the other a little chap. I never saw two eviller looking rascals in my life. Just as they came alongside me, one says to the other, 'Don't be afraid; I'll have the girl at the station all right at eight o'clock sharp.' The other said something that I could not catch, and then I lost sight of them. But what I had heard stuck in my head, and so I accordingly went off to the station, arriving there a little before the hour. I hadn't been there long before the smallest of the two chaps I'd seen in the street came on to the platform, and

began looking about him. By the face of him he didn't seem at all pleased at not finding the other man waiting for him. A train drew up at the platform, and presently, just before it started, I saw the other and a young lady wearing a heavy veil come quickly along. The first man saw them, and gave a little cry of delight. 'I thought you'd be too late,' says he. 'No fear of that,' says the other, and jumps into a first-class carriage, telling the girl to get in after him, which she does, crying the while, as I could see. Then the chap on the platform says to the other who was leaning out of the window, 'Write to me from Bourke, and tell me how she gets on.' 'You bet,' says his friend. 'And don't you forget to keep your eye on Hatteras.' 'Don't you be afraid,' answered the man on the platform. Then the guard whistled, and the train went out of the station. Directly I was able to get away, and first thing this morning came on here. Now you have my information, and I'll trouble you for that fifty pound."

"Not so fast, my friend. Your story seems very good, but I want to ask a few questions first. Had the bigger man — the man who went up to Bourke, a deep cut over his left eye?"

"Now I come to think of it, he had. I'd forgotten to tell you that."

"So it was he, then? But are you certain it was Miss Wetherell? Remember she wore a veil. Could you see if her hair was flaxen in colour?"

"Very light it was; but I couldn't see rightly which colour it was."

"You're sure it was a light colour?"

"Quite sure. I could swear to it in a court of law if you wanted me to."

"That's all right then, because it shows me your story is a fabrication. Come, get out of this house or I'll throw you out. You scoundrel, for two pins I'd give you such a thrashing as you'd remember all your life!"

"None o' that, governor. Don't you try it on. Hand us over that fifty quid."

With that the scoundrel whipped out a revolver and pointed it at me. But before he could threaten again I had got hold of his wrist with one hand, snatched the pistol with the other, and sent him sprawling on his back upon the carpet.

"Now, you brute," I cried, "what am I going to do with you, do you think? Get up and clear out of the house before I take my boot to you."

He got up and began to brush his clothes.

"I want my fifty pound," he cried.

"You'll get more than you want if you come here again," I said. "Out you go!"

With that I got him by the collar and dragged him out of the room across the hall, much to the butler's astonishment, through the front door, and then kicked him down the steps. He fell in a heap on the gravel.

"All right, my fine bloke," he said as he lay there; "you wait till I get you outside. I'll fix you up, and don't you make no mistake."

I went back to the dining-room without paying any attention to his threats. Both Mr. Wetherell and Beckenham had been witnesses of what had occurred, and now they questioned me concerning his visit. I gave them an outline of the story the man had told me and convinced them of its absurdity. Then Mr. Wetherell rose to his feet.

"Now shall we go and see McMurtough?"

"Certainly," I said; "I'll be ready as soon as you are."

"You will come with us, I hope, Lord Beckenham?" Wetherell said.

"With every pleasure," answered his lordship, and thereupon we went off to get ready.

Three-quarters of an hour later we were sitting in Mr. McMurtough's office. The upshot of the interview was that Mr. McMurtough fell in with our plans as soon as we had uttered them, and expressed himself delighted to lend his yacht in such a good cause.

"I only wish I could come with you," he said; "but unfortunately that is quite impossible. However, you are more than welcome to my boat. I will give you a letter, or send one to the Captain, so that she may be prepared for sea to-day. Will you see about provisioning her, or shall I?"

"We will attend to that," said Wetherell. "All the expenses must of course be mine."

"As you please about that, my old friend," returned McMurtough.

"Where is she lying?" asked Wetherell.

The owner gave us the direction, and then having sincerely thanked him, we set off in search of her. She was a nice craft of about a hundred and fifty tons burden, and looked as if she ought to be a good sea boat. Chartering a wherry, we were pulled off to her. The captain was below when we arrived, but a hail brought him on deck. Mr. Wetherell then explained our errand, and gave him his owner's letter. He read it through, and having done so, said —

"I am at your service, gentlemen. From what Mr. McMurtough says here I gather that there is no time to lose, so with your permission I'll get to work at once."

"Order all the coal you want, and tell the steward to do the same for anything he may require in his department. The bills must be sent in to me."

"Very good, Mr. Wetherell. And what time will you be ready?"

"As soon as you are. Can you get away by three o'clock this afternoon, think you?"

"Well, it will be a bit of a scramble, but I think we can manage it. Anyhow, I'll do my best, you may be sure of that, sir."

"I'm sure you will. There is grave need for it. Now we'll go back and arrange a few matters ashore. My man shall bring our baggage down later on."

"Very good, sir. I'll have your berths prepared."

With that we descended to the boat again, and were pulled ashore. Arriving there, Mr. Wetherell asked what we should do first.

"Hadn't we better go up to the town and purchase a few rifles and some ammunition?" I said. "We can have them sent down direct to the boat."

"A very good suggestion. Let us go at once."

We accordingly set off for George Street — to a shop I remembered having seen. There we purchased half a dozen Winchester repeaters, with a good supply of ammunition. They were to be sent down to the yacht without fail that morning. This done, we stood on the pavement debating what we should do next. Finally it was decided that Mr. Wetherell and Beckenham should go home to pack, while I made one or two other small purchases, and then join them. Accordingly, bidding them good-bye, I went on down the street, completed my business, and was about to hail a cab and follow them, when a thought struck me: Why should I not visit Messrs. Dawson & Gladman, and find out why they were advertising for me? This I determined to do, and accordingly set off for Castlereagh Street.

In a small room leading off the main passage, three clerks were seated. To them I addressed myself, asking if I might see the partners.

"Mr. Dawson is the only one in town, sir," said the boy to whom I spoke. "If you'll give me your name, I'll take it in to him."

"My name is Hatteras," I said. "Mr. Richard Hatteras."

In less than two minutes the clerk returned, and begged me to follow him, which I did. At the end of a long passage we passed through a curtained doorway, and I stood in the presence of the chief partner.

"I have great pleasure in making your acquaintance, Mr. Hatteras," he said, as I came to an anchor in a chair. "You noticed our advertisement, I presume?"

"I saw it this morning," I answered. "And it is on that account I am here."

"One moment before we proceed any further. Forgive what I am about to say — but you will see yourself that it is a point I am compelled not to neglect. Can you convince me as to your identity?"

"Very easily," I replied, diving my hand into my breast-pocket and taking out some papers. "First and foremost, here is my bank-book. Here is my card-case. And here are two or three letters addressed to me by London and Sydney firms. The Hon. Sylvester Wetherell, Colonial Secretary, will be glad, I'm sure, to vouch for me. Is that sufficient to convince you?"

"More than sufficient," he answered, smiling. "Now let me tell you for what purpose we desired you to call upon us." Here he opened a drawer and took out a letter. "First and foremost, you must understand that we are the Sydney agents of Messrs. Atwin, Dobbs & Forsyth, of Furnival's Inn, London. From them, by the last English mail, we received this letter. I gather that you are the son of James Dymoke Hatteras, who was drowned at sea in the year 1880?"

"I am."

"Your father was the third son of Sir Edward Hatteras of Murdlestone, in the county of Hampshire?"

"He was."

"And the brother of Sir William, who had one daughter, Gwendoline Mary?"

"That is so."

"Well, Mr. Hatteras, it is my sad duty to inform you that within a week of your departure from England your cousin, the young lady just referred to, was drowned by accident in a pond near her home, and that her father, who had been ailing for some few days, died of heart disease on hearing the sad tidings. In that case, so my correspondents inform me, there being no nearer issue, you succeed to the title and estates — which I also learn are of considerable value, including the house and park, ten farms, and a large amount of house property, a rent roll of fifteen thousand a year, and accumulated capital of nearly a hundred thousand pounds."

"Good gracious! Is this really true?"

"Quite true. You can examine the letter for yourself."

I took it up from the table and read it through, hardly able to believe my eyes.

"You are indeed a man to be envied, Mr. Hatteras," said the lawyer. "The title is an old one, and I believe the property is considered one of the best in that part of England."

"It is! But I can hardly believe that it is really mine."

"There is no doubt about that, however. You are a baronet as certainly as I am a lawyer. I presume you would like us to take whatever action is necessary?"

"By all means. This afternoon I am leaving Sydney, for a week or two, for the Islands. I will sign any papers when I come back."

"I will bear that in mind. And your address in Sydney is —"

"Care of the Honourable Sylvester Wetherell, Potts Point."

"Thank you. And, by the way, my correspondents have desired me on their behalf to pay in to your account at the Oceania the sum of five thousand pounds. This I will do to-day."

"I am obliged to you. Now I think I must be going. To tell the truth, I hardly know whether I am standing on my head or my heels."

"Oh, you will soon get over that."

"Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Sir Richard."

With that, I bade him farewell, and went out of the office, feeling quite dazed by my good fortune. I thought of the poor idiot whose end had been so tragic, and of the old man as I had last seen him, shaking his fist at me from the window of the house. And to think that that lovely home was mine, and that I was a baronet, the principal representative of a race as old as any in the country-side! It seemed too wonderful to be true!

Hearty were the congratulations showered upon me at Potts Point, you may be sure, when I told my tale, and my health was drunk at lunch with much goodwill. But our minds were too much taken up with the arrangements for our departure that afternoon to allow us to think very much of anything else. By two o'clock we were ready to leave the house, by half-past we were on board the yacht, at three-fifteen the anchor was up, and a few moments later we were ploughing our way down the harbour.

Our search for Phyllis had reached another stage.



CHAPTER 14

THE ISLANDS AND WHAT WE FOUND THERE

To those who have had no experience of the South Pacific the constantly recurring beauties of our voyage would have seemed like a foretaste of Heaven itself. From Sydney, until the Loyalty Group lay behind us, we had one long spell of exquisite weather. By night under the winking stars, and by day in the warm sunlight, our trim little craft ploughed her way across smooth seas, and our only occupation was to promenade or loaf about the decks and to speculate as to the result of the expedition upon which we had embarked.

Having sighted the Isle of Pines we turned our bows almost due north and headed for the New Hebrides. Every hour our impatience was growing greater. In less than two days, all being well, we should be at our destination, and twenty-four hours after that, if our fortune proved in the ascendant, we ought to be on our way back with Phyllis in our possession once more. And what this would mean to me I can only leave you to guess.

One morning, just as the faint outline of the coast of Aneityum was peering up over the horizon ahead, Wetherell and I chanced to be sitting in the bows. The sea was as smooth as glass, and the tinkling of the water round the little vessel's nose as she turned it off in snowy lines from either bow, was the only sound to be heard. As usual the conversation, after wandering into other topics, came back to the subject nearest our hearts. This led us to make a few remarks anent Nikola and his character. I could not help asking him for an explanation.

"You want to know how it is that I am so frightened of Nikola?" he asked. "Well, to give you my reason will necessitate my telling you a story. I don't mind doing that at all, but what I am afraid of is that you may be inclined to doubt its probability. However, if you want to hear it you shall."

"I should like to above all things," I replied. "I have been longing to ask you about it for some time past, but could not quite screw up my courage."

"Well, in the first place," Mr. Wetherell said, "you must understand that before I became a Minister of the Crown, or indeed a Member of Parliament at all, I was a barrister with a fairly remunerative practice. That was before my wife's death and when Phyllis was at school. Up to the time I am going to tell you about I had taken part in no very sensational case. But my opportunity for earning notoriety was, though I did not know it, near at hand. One day I was briefed to defend a man accused of the murder of a Chinaman aboard a Sydney vessel on a voyage from Shanghai. At first there seemed to be no doubt at all as to his guilt, but by a singular chance, with the details of which I will not bore you, I hit upon a scheme which got him off. I remember the man perfectly, and a queer fellow he was, half-witted, I thought, and at the time of the trial within an ace of dying of consumption. His gratitude was the more pathetic because he had not the wherewithal to pay me. However, he made it up to me in another way.

"One wet night, a couple of months or so after the trial, I was sitting in my drawing-room listening to my wife's music, when a servant entered to tell me that a woman wanted to see me. I went out into the passage to find waiting there a tall buxom lass of about five-and-twenty years of age. She was poorly dressed, but in a great state of excitement.

"Are you Mr. Wetherell?" she said; 'the gentleman as defended China Pete in the trial the other day?'

"I am," I answered. 'What can I do for you? I hope China Pete is not in trouble again?'

"He's in a worse trouble this time, sir," said the woman. 'He's dyin', and he sent me to fetch you to 'im before he goes.'

"But what does he want me for?" I asked rather suspiciously.

"I'm sure I dunno," was the girl's reply. 'But he's been callin' for you all this blessed day: "Send for Mr. Wetherell! send for Mr. Wetherell!" So off I came, when I got back from work, to fetch you. If you're comin', sir, you'd best be quick, for he won't last till mornin'.'

"Very well, I'll come with you at once," I said. Then, having told my wife not to sit up for me, I followed my strange messenger out of the house.

"For nearly an hour we walked on and on, plunging deeper into the lower quarter of the town. All through the march

my guide maintained a rigid silence, walking a few paces ahead, and only recognizing the fact that I was following her by nodding in a certain direction whenever we arrived at cross thoroughfares or interlacing lanes.

"At last we arrived at the street she wanted. At the corner she came suddenly to a standstill, and putting her two first fingers into her mouth blew a shrill whistle, after the fashion of street boys. A moment later a shock-headed urchin about ten years old made his appearance from a dark alley and came towards us. The woman said something to him, which I did not catch, and then turning sharply to her left hand beckoned to me to follow her.

"From the street itself we passed, by way of a villainous alley, into a large courtyard, where brooded a silence like that of death. Indeed, a more weird and desolate place I don't remember ever to have met with. Not a soul was to be seen, and though it was surrounded by houses, only two feeble lights showed themselves. Towards one of these my guide made her way, stopping on the threshold. Upon a panel she rapped with her fingers, and as she did so a window on the first floor opened, and the boy we had met in the street looked out.

"How many?" inquired the woman, who had brought me, in a loud whisper.

"None now," replied the boy; "but there's been a power of Chinkies hereabouts all the evenin', an' 'arf an hour ago there was a gent in a cloak."

"Without waiting to hear any more the woman entered the house and I followed close on her heels. The adventure was clearly coming to a head now.

"When the door had been closed behind us the boy appeared at the top of a flight of stairs with a lighted candle. We accordingly ascended to him, and having done so made our way towards a door at the end of the abominably dirty landing. At intervals I could hear the sound of coughing coming from a room at the end. My companion, however, bade me stop, while she went herself into the room, shutting the door after her. I was left alone with the boy, who immediately took me under his protection, and for my undivided benefit performed a series of highly meritorious acrobatic performances upon the feeble banisters, to his own danger, but apparent satisfaction. Suddenly, just as he was about to commence what promised to be the most successful item in his *repertoire*, he paused, lay flat on his stomach upon the floor, and craned his head over the side, where once banisters had been, and gazed into the half dark well below. All was quiet as the grave. Then, without warning, an almond-eyed, pigtailed head appeared on the stairs and looked upwards. Before I could say anything to stop him, the youth had divested himself of his one slipper, taken it in his right hand, leaned over a bit farther, and struck the ascending Celestial a severe blow on the mouth with the heel of it. There was the noise of a hasty descent and the banging of the street door a moment later, then all was still again, and the youngster turned to me.

"That was Ah Chong," he said confidentially. "He's the sixth Chinkie I've landed that way since dark."

"This important piece of information he closed with a double-jointed oath of remarkable atrocity, and, having done so, would have recommenced the performance of acrobatic feats had I not stopped him by asking the reason of his action. He looked at me with a grin —

"I dunno, but all I cares is that China Pete in there gives me a sprat (sixpence) for every Chinkie what I keeps out of the 'ouse. He's a rum one is China Pete; an' can't he cough — my word!" he concluded.

"I was about to put another question when the door opened and the girl who had brought me to the house beckoned me into the room. I entered and she left me alone with the occupant.

"Of all the filthy places I have ever seen — and I have had the ill-luck to discover a good many in my time — that one eclipsed them all. On the bed, propped up by pillows and evidently in the last stage of collapse, was the man called China Pete. When we were alone together he pointed to a box near the bed and signified that I should seat myself. I did so, at the same time taking occasion to express my sorrow at finding him in this lamentable condition. He made no reply to my civilities, but after a little pause found strength enough to whisper. 'See if there's anybody at the door.' I went across, opened the door and looked into the passage, but save the boy, who was now sitting on the top step of the stairs at the other end, there was not a soul in sight. I told him this, and having again closed the door, sat down on the box and waited for him to speak.

"You did me a good turn, Mr. Wetherell, over that trial," the invalid said at last, "and I couldn't make it worth your while."

"Oh, you mustn't let that worry you," I answered soothingly. "You would have paid me if you had been able."

"Perhaps I should, perhaps I shouldn't, anyhow I didn't, and I want to make it up to you now. Feel under my pillow

and bring out what you find there.’

“I did as he directed me and brought to light a queer little wooden stick about three and a half inches long, made of some heavy timber and covered all over with Chinese inscriptions; at one end was a tiny bit of heavy gold cord much tarnished. I gave it to him and he looked at it fondly.

“Do you know the value of this little stick?’ he asked after a while.

“‘I have no possible notion,’ I replied.

“‘Make a guess,’ he said.

“To humour him I guessed five pounds. He laughed with scorn.

“Five pounds! O ye gods! Why, as a bit of stick it’s not worth five pence, but for what it really is there is not money enough in the world to purchase it. If I could get about again I would make myself the richest and most powerful man on earth with it. If you could only guess one particle of the dangers I’ve been through to get it you would die of astonishment. And the irony of it all is that now I’ve got it I can’t make use of it. On six different occasions the priests of the Llamaserai in Peking have tried to murder me to get hold of it. I brought it down from the centre of China disguised as a wandering beggar. That business connected with the murder of the Chinaman on board the ship, against which you defended me, was on account of it. And now I lie here dying like a dog, with the key to over ten millions in my hand. Nikola has tried for five years to obtain it, without success however. He little dreams I’ve got it after all. If he did I’d be a dead man by now.’

“‘Who is this Nikola then?’ I asked.

“‘Dr. Nikola? Well, he’s Nikola, and that’s all I can tell you. If you’re a wise man you’ll want to know no more. Ask the Chinese mothers nursing their almond-eyed spawn in Peking who he is; ask the Japanese, ask the Malays, the Hindoos, the Burmese, the coal porters in Port Said, the Buddhist priests of Ceylon; ask the King of Corea, the men up in Thibet, the Spanish priests in Manilla, or the Sultan of Borneo, the ministers of Siam, or the French in Saigon — they’ll all know Dr. Nikola and his cat, and, take my word, they fear him.’

“I looked at the little stick in my hand and wondered if the man had gone mad.

“‘What do you wish me to do with this?’ I asked.

“‘Take it away with you,’ he answered, ‘and guard it like your life, and when you have occasion, use it. Remember you have in your hand what will raise a million men and the equivalent of over ten mil ——’

“At this point a violent fit of coughing seized him and nearly tore him to pieces. I lifted him up a little in the bed, but before I could take my hands away a stream of blood had gushed from his lips. Like a flash of thought I ran to the door to call the girl, the boy on the stairs re-echoed my shout, and in less time than it takes to tell the woman was in the room. But we were too late — *China Pete was dead*.

“After giving her all the money I had about me to pay for the funeral, I bade her good-bye, and with the little stick in my pocket returned to my home. Once there I sat myself down in my study, took my legacy out of my pocket and carefully examined it. As to its peculiar power and value, as described to me by the dead man, I hardly knew what to think. My own private opinion was that China Pete was not sane at the time he told me. And yet, how was I to account for the affray with the Chinaman on the boat, and the evident desire the Celestials in Sydney had to obtain information concerning it? After half an hour’s consideration of it I locked it up in a drawer of my safe and went upstairs to bed.

“Next day China Pete was buried, and by the end of the month I had well-nigh forgotten that he had ever existed, and had hardly thought of his queer little gift, which still reposed in the upper drawer of my safe. But I was to hear more of it later on.

“One night, about a month after my coming into possession of the stick, my wife and I entertained a few friends at dinner.

“As the clock struck eleven I said good-night to the last of my guests upon the door-step. The carriage had not gone fifty yards down the street before a hansom drew up before my door and a man dressed in a heavy cloak jumped out. Bidding the driver wait for him he ran up my steps.

“‘Mr. Wetherell, I believe?’ he said. I nodded and wished him ‘good-evening,’ at the same time asking his business.

“‘I will tell you with pleasure,’ he answered, ‘if you will permit me five minutes alone with you. It is most important, and as I leave Sydney early to-morrow morning you will see that there is not much time to spare.’

"I led the way into the house and to my study, which was in the rear, overlooking the garden. Once there I bade him be seated, taking up my position at my desk.

"Then, in the light of the lamp, I became aware of the extraordinary personality of my visitor. He looked at me very searchingly for a moment and then said: 'My business will surprise you a little I expect, Mr. Wetherell. First, if you will allow me I will tell you something about myself and then ask you a question. You must understand that I am pretty well known as an Eastern traveller; from Port Said to the Kuriles there is hardly a place with which I am not acquainted. I have a hobby. I am a collector of Eastern curios, but there is one thing I have never been able to obtain.'

"And that is?"

"A Chinese executioner's symbol of office."

"But how can I help you in that direction?" I asked, completely mystified.

"By selling me one that has lately come into your possession," he said. "It is a little black stick, about three inches long and covered with Chinese characters. I happened to hear, quite by chance, that you had one in your possession, and I have taken a journey of some thousands of miles to endeavour to purchase it from you."

"I went across to the safe, unlocked it, and took out the little stick China Pete had given me. When I turned round I almost dropped it with surprise as I saw the look of eagerness that rose in my visitor's face. But he pulled himself together and said, as calmly as he had yet addressed me:

"That is the very thing. If you will allow me to purchase it, it will complete my collection. What value do you place upon it?"

"I have no sort of notion of its worth," I answered, putting it down on the table and looking at it. Then in a flash a thought came into my brain, and I was about to speak when he addressed me again.

"Of course my reason for wishing to buy it is rather a hare-brained one, but if you care to let me have it I will give you fifty pounds for it with pleasure."

"Not enough, Dr. Nikola," I said with a smile.

"He jumped as if he had been shot, and then clasped his hands tight on the arm of his chair. My random bolt had gone straight to the heart of the bulls-eye. This man then *was* Dr. Nikola, the extraordinary individual against whom China Pete had warned me. I was determined now that, come what might, he should not have the stick.

"Do you not consider the offer I make you a good one then, Mr. Wetherell?" he asked.

"I'm sorry to say I don't think the stick is for sale," I answered. "It was left to me by a man in return for a queer sort of service I rendered him, and I think I should like to keep it as a souvenir."

"I will raise my offer to a hundred pounds in that case," said Nikola.

"I would rather not part with it," I said, and as I spoke, as if to clinch the matter, I took it up and returned it to the safe, taking care to lock the door upon it.

"I will give you five hundred pounds for it," cried Nikola, now thoroughly excited. "Surely that will tempt you?"

"I'm afraid an offer of ten times that amount would make no difference," I replied, feeling more convinced than ever that I would not part with it.

"He laid himself back in his chair, and for nearly a minute and a half stared me full in the face. You have seen Nikola's eyes, so I needn't tell you what a queer effect they are able to produce. I could not withdraw mine from them, and I felt that if I did not make an effort I should soon be mesmerized. So, pulling myself together, I sprang from my chair, and, by doing so, let him see that our interview was at an end. However, he was not going without a last attempt to drive a bargain. When he saw that I was not to be moved his temper gave way, and he bluntly told me that I would *have* to sell it.

"There is no compulsion in the matter," I said warmly. "The curio is my own property, and I will do just as I please with it."

"He thereupon begged my pardon, asked me to attribute his impatience to the collector's eagerness, and after a few last words bade me 'good-night,' and left the house.

"When his cab had rolled away I went back to my study and sat thinking for awhile. Then something prompted me to take the stick out from the safe. I did so, and sat at my table gazing at it, wondering what the mystery might be to which it was the key. That it was not what Dr. Nikola had described it I felt certain.

“At the end of half an hour I put it in my pocket, intending to take it upstairs to show my wife, locked the safe again and went off to my dressing-room. When I had described the interview and shown the stick to my wife I placed it in the drawer of the looking-glass and went to bed.

“Next morning, about three o’clock, I was awakened by the sound of some one knocking violently at my door. I jumped out of bed and inquired who it might be. To my intense surprise the answer was ‘Police!’ I therefore donned my dressing-gown, and went out to find a sergeant of police on the landing waiting for me.

“‘What is the matter?’ I cried.

“‘A burglar!’ was his answer. ‘We’ve got him downstairs; caught him in the act.’

“I followed the officer down to the study. What a scene was there! The safe had been forced, and its contents lay scattered in every direction. One drawer of my writing-table was wide open, and in a corner, handcuffed, and guarded by a stalwart constable, stood a Chinaman.

“Well, to make a long story short, the man was tried, and after denying all knowledge of Nikola — who, by the way, could not be found — was convicted, and sentenced to five years’ hard labour. For a month I heard no more about the curio. Then a letter arrived from an English solicitor in Shanghai, demanding from me, on behalf of a Chinaman residing in that place, a little wooden stick covered with Chinese characters, which was said to have been stolen by an Englishman, known in Shanghai as China Pete. This was very clearly another attempt on Nikola’s part to obtain possession of it, so I replied to the effect that I could not entertain the request.

“A month or so later — I cannot, however, be particular as to the exact date — I found myself again in communication with Nikola, this time from South America. But there was this difference this time: he used undisguised threats, not only against myself, in the event of my still refusing to give him what he wanted, but also against my wife and daughter. I took no notice, with the result that my residence was again broken into, but still without success. Now I no longer locked the talisman up in the safe, but hid it in a place where I knew no one could possibly find it. My mind, you will see, was perfectly made up; I was not going to be driven into surrendering it.

“One night, a month after my wife’s death, returning to my house I was garrotted and searched within a hundred yards of my own front door, but my assailants could not find it on me. Then peculiar pressure from other quarters was brought to bear; my servants were bribed, and my life became almost a burden to me. What was more, I began to develop that extraordinary fear of Nikola which seems to seize upon every one who has any dealings with him. When I went home to England some months back, I did it because my spirits had got into such a depressed state that I could not remain in Australia. But I took care to deposit the stick with my plate in the bank before I left. There it remained till I returned, when I put it back in its old hiding-place again.

“The day after I reached London I happened to be crossing Trafalgar Square. Believing that I had left him at least ten thousand miles away, you may imagine my horror when I saw Dr. Nikola watching me from the other side of the road. Then and there I returned to my hotel, bade Phyllis pack with all possible despatch, and that same afternoon we started to return to Australia. The rest you know. Now what do you think of it all?”

“It’s an extraordinary story. Where is the stick at the present moment?”

“In my pocket. Would you like to see it?”

“Very much, if you would permit me to do so.”

He unbuttoned his coat, and from a carefully contrived pocket under the arm drew out a little piece of wood of exactly the length and shape he had described. I took it from him and gazed at it carefully. It was covered all over with Chinese writing, and had a piece of gold silk attached to the handle. There was nothing very remarkable about it; but I must own I was strangely fascinated by it when I remembered the misery it had caused, the changes and chances it had brought about, the weird story told by China Pete, and the efforts that had been made by Nikola to obtain possession of it. I gave it back to its owner, and then stood looking out over the smooth sea, wondering where Phyllis was and what she was doing. Nikola, when I met him, would have a heavy account to settle with me, and if my darling reported any further cruelty on his part I would show no mercy. But why had Mr. Wetherell brought the curio with him now? I put the question.

“For one very good reason,” he answered. “If it is the stick Nikola is after, as I have every right to suppose, he may demand it as a ransom for my girl, and I am quite willing to let him have it. The wretched thing has caused sufficient misery to make me only too glad to be rid of it.”

"I hope, however, we shall be able to get her without giving it up," I said. "Now let us go aft to lunch."

The day following we were within a hundred miles of our destination, and by mid-day of the day following that again were near enough to render it advisable to hold a council over our intended movements. Accordingly, a little before lunch time the Marquis, Wetherell, the skipper and myself, met under the after awning to consider our plan of war.

"The first matter to be taken into consideration, I think, Mr. Wetherell," said the skipper, "is the point as to which side of the island we shall bring up on."

"You will be able to settle that," answered Wetherell, looking at me. "You are acquainted with the place, and can best advise us."

"I will do so to the best of my ability," I said, sitting down on the deck and drawing an outline with a piece of chalk. "The island is shaped like this. There is no reef. Here is the best anchorage, without doubt, but here is the point where we shall be most likely to approach without being observed. The trend of the land is all upward from the shore, and, as far as I remember, the most likely spot for a hut, if they are detaining Miss Wetherell there, as we suppose, will be on a little plateau looking south, and hard by the only water on the island."

"And what sort of anchorage shall we get there, do you think?" asked the skipper, who very properly wished to run no risk with his owner's boat.

"Mostly coral. None too good, perhaps, but as we shall have steam up, quite safe enough."

"And how do you propose that we shall reach the hut when we land?"

"I have been thinking that out," I said, "and I have come to the conclusion that the best plan would be for us to approach the island after dark, to heave to about three miles out and pull ashore in the boat. We will then ascend the hill by the eastern slope and descend upon them. They will probably not expect us from that quarter, and it will at least be easier than climbing the hill in the face of a heavy fire. What do you say?"

They all agreed that it seemed practicable.

"Very good then," said the skipper, "we'll have lunch, and afterwards begin our preparations." Then turning to me, "I'll get you to come into my cabin, Mr. Hatteras, by-and-by and take a look at the Admiralty chart, if you will. You will be able probably to tell me if you think it can be relied on."

"I'll do so with pleasure," I answered, and then we went below.

Directly our meal was over I accompanied the skipper to look at the chart, and upon it we marked our anchorage. Then an adjournment was made aft, and our equipment of rifles and revolvers thoroughly overhauled. We had decided earlier that our landing party should consist of eight men — Wetherell, Beckenham, the mate of the yacht, myself, and four of the crew, each of whom would be supplied with a Winchester repeating rifle, a revolver, and a dozen cartridges. Not a shot was to be fired, however, unless absolutely necessary, and the greatest care was to be taken in order to approach the hut, if possible, without disturbing its inmates.

When the arms had been distributed and carefully examined, the sixteen foot surf-boat was uncovered and preparations made for hoisting her overboard. By the time this was done it was late in the afternoon, and almost soon enough for us to be thinking about overcoming the distance which separated us from our destination.

About dusk I was standing aft, leaning against the taff-rail, when Beckenham came up and stood beside me. It was wonderful what a difference these few months had made in him; he was now as brown as a berry, and as fine-looking a young fellow as any man could wish to see.

"We shall be picking up the island directly," I said as he came to an anchor alongside me. "Do you think you ought to go to-night? Remember you will run the risk of being shot!"

"I have thought of that," he said. "I believe it's my duty to do my best to help you and Mr. Wetherell."

"But what would your father say if he knew?"

"He would say that I only did what was right. I have just been writing to him, telling him everything. If anything *should* happen to me you will find the letter on the chest of drawers in your cabin. I know you will send it on to him. But if we both come out of it safely and rescue Miss Wetherell I'm going to ask a favour."

"Granted before I know what it is!"

"It isn't a very big one. I want you to let me be your best man at your wedding?"

“So you shall. And a better I could not possibly desire.”

“I like to hear you say that. We’ve been through a good deal together since we left Europe, haven’t we?”

“We have, and to-night will bring it to a climax, or I’m much mistaken.”

“Do you think Nikola will show fight?”

“Not a doubt about it I should think. If he finds himself cornered he’ll probably fight like a demon.”

“It’s Baxter I want to meet.”

“Nikola is my man. I’ve a big grudge against him, and I want to pay it.”

“How little we thought when we were cruising about Bournemouth Bay together that within such a short space of time we should be sailing the South Pacific on such an errand! It seems almost too strange to be possible.”

“So it does! All’s well that ends well, however. Let’s hope we’re going to be successful to-night. Now I’m going on the bridge to see if I can pick the land up ahead.”

I left him and went forward to the captain’s side. Dusk had quite fallen by this time, rendering it impossible to see very far ahead. A hand had been posted in the fore-rigging as a look-out, and every moment we expected to hear his warning cry; but nearly an hour passed, and still it did not come.

Then suddenly the shout rang out, “Land ahead!” and we knew that our destination was in sight. Long before this all our lights had been obscured, and so, in the darkness — for a thick pall of cloud covered the sky — we crept up towards the coast. Within a couple of minutes of hearing the hail every man on board was on deck gazing in the direction in which we were proceeding.

By tea time we had brought the land considerably nearer, and by eight o’clock were within three miles of it. Not a sign, however, of any craft could we discover, and the greatest vigilance had to be exercised on our part to allow no sign to escape us to show our whereabouts to those ashore. Exactly at nine o’clock the shore party, fully armed, assembled on deck, and the surf-boat was swung overboard. Then in the darkness we crept down the gangway and took our places. The mate was in possession of the tiller, and when all was ready we set off for the shore.



CHAPTER 15

The 1ST CONCLUSION

Once we had left her side and turned our boat's nose towards the land, the yacht lay behind us, a black mass, nearly absorbed in the general shadow. Not a light showed itself, and everything was as still as the grave; the only noise to be heard was the steady dip, dip of the oars in the smooth water and now and then the chirp of the rowlocks. For nearly half an hour we pulled on, pausing at intervals to listen, but nothing of an alarming nature met our ears. The island was every moment growing larger, the beach more plain to the eye, and the hill more clearly defined.

As soon as the boat grounded we sprang out and, leaving one hand to look after her, made our way ashore. It was a strange experience that landing on a strange beach on such an errand and at such an hour, but we were all too much taken up with the work which lay before us to think of that. Having left the water's edge we came to a standstill beneath a group of palms and discussed the situation. As the command of the expedition had fallen upon me I decided upon the following course of action: To begin with, I would leave the party behind me and set out by myself to ascertain the whereabouts of the hut. Having discovered this I would return, and we would thereupon make our way inland and endeavour to capture it. I explained the idea in as few words as possible to my followers, and then, bidding them wait for me where they were, at the same time warning them against letting their presence be discovered, I set off up the hill in the direction I knew the plateau to lie. The undergrowth was very thick and the ground rocky; for this reason it was nearly twenty minutes before I readied the top of the hill. Then down the other side I crept, picking my way carefully, and taking infinite precautions that no noise should serve to warn our foes of my coming.

At last I reached the plateau and looked about me. A small perpendicular cliff, some sixty feet in height, was before me, so throwing myself down upon my stomach, I wriggled my way to its edge. When I got there I looked over and discovered three well-built huts on a little plateau at the cliff's base. At the same moment a roar of laughter greeted my ears from the building on the left. It was followed by the voice of a man singing to the accompaniment of a banjo. Under cover of his music I rose to my feet and crept back through the bushes, by the track along which I had come. I knew enough to distribute my forces now.

Having reached my friends again I informed them of what I had seen, and we then arranged the mode of attack as follows: The mate of the yacht, with two of the hands, would pass round the hill to the left of the plateau, Wetherell and another couple of men would take the right side, while Beckenham and myself crept down from the back. Not a sound was to be made or a shot fired until I blew my whistle. Then, with one last word of caution, we started on our climb.

By this time the clouds had cleared off the sky and the stars shone brightly. Once more I arrived at the small precipice behind the huts, and, having done so, sat down for a few moments to give the other parties time to take up their positions. Then, signing to Beckenham to accompany me, I followed the trend of the precipice along till I discovered a place where we might descend in safety. In less than a minute we were on the plateau below, creeping towards the centre hut. Still our approach was undetected. Bidding Beckenham in a whisper wait for me, I crept cautiously round to the front, keeping as much as possible in the shadow. As soon as I had found the door, I tiptoed towards it and prepared to force my way inside but I had an adventure in store for me which I had not anticipated.

Seated in the doorway, almost hidden in the shadow, was the figure of a man. He must have been asleep, for he did not become aware of my presence until I was within a foot of him. Then he sprang to his feet and was about to give the alarm. Before he could do so, however, I was upon him. A desperate hand-to-hand struggle followed, in which I fought solely for his throat. This once obtained I tightened my fingers upon it and squeezed until he fell back unconscious. It was like a horrible nightmare, that combat without noise in the dark entry of the hut, and I was more than thankful that it ended so satisfactorily for me. As soon as I had disentangled myself, I rose to my feet and proceeded across his body into the hut itself. A swing door led from the porch, and this I pushed open.

"Who is it, and what do you want?" said a voice which I should have recognized anywhere.

In answer I took Phyllis in my arms and, whispering my name, kissed her over and over again. She uttered a little cry of astonishment and delight. Then, bidding her step quietly, I passed out into the starlight, leading her after me. As we were about to make for the path by which I had descended, Beckenham stepped forward, and at the same instant the man with whom I had been wrestling came to his senses and gave a shout of alarm. In an instant there was a noise of scurrying feet and a great shouting of orders.

"Make for the boats!" I cried at the top of my voice, and, taking Phyllis by the hand, set off as quickly as I could go up the path, Beckenham assisting her on the other side.

If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget that rush up the hill. In and out of trees and bushes, scratching ourselves and tearing our clothes, we dashed; conscious only of the necessity for speed. Before we were half-way down the other side Phyllis's strength was quite exhausted, so I took her in my arms and carried her the remainder of the distance. At last we reached the boat and jumped on board. The rest of the party were already there, and the word being given we prepared to row out to the yacht. But before we could push off a painful surprise was in store for us. The Marquis, who had been counting the party, cried: "*Where is Mr. Wetherell?*"

We looked round upon each other, and surely enough the old gentleman was missing. Discovering this, Phyllis nearly gave way, and implored us to go back at once to find him. But having rescued her with so much difficulty I did not wish to run any risk of letting her fall into her enemies' hands again; so selecting four volunteers from the party, I bade the rest pull the boat out to the yacht and give Miss Wetherell into the captain's charge, while the others accompanied me ashore again in search of her father. Having done this the boat was to return and wait for us.

Quickly we splashed our way back to the beach, and then, plunging into the undergrowth, began our search for the missing man. As we did not know where to search, it was like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay, but presently one of the hands remembered having seen him descending the hill, so we devoted our attentions to that side. For nearly two hours we toiled up and down, but without success. Not a sign of the old gentleman was to be seen. Could he have mistaken his way and be even now searching for us on another beach? To make sure of this we set off and thoroughly searched the two bays in the direction he would most likely have taken. But still without success. Perhaps he had been captured and carried back to the huts? In that case we had better proceed thither and try to rescue him. This, however, was a much more serious undertaking, and you may imagine it was with considerable care that we approached the plateau again.

When we reached it the huts were as quiet as when I had first made their acquaintance. Not a sound came up to the top of the little precipice save the rustling of the wind in the palms at its foot. It seemed difficult to believe that there had been such a tumult on the spot so short a time before.

Again with infinite care we crept down to the buildings, this time, however, without encountering a soul. The first was empty, so was the second, and so was the third. This result was quite unexpected, and rendered the situation even more mysterious than before.

By the time we had thoroughly explored the plateau and its surroundings it was nearly daylight, and still we had discovered no trace of the missing man. Just as the sun rose above the sea line we descended the hill again and commenced a second search along the beach, with no better luck, however, than on the previous occasion. Wetherell and our assailants seemed to have completely disappeared from the island.

About six o'clock, thoroughly worn out, we returned to the spot where the boat was waiting for us. What was to be done? We could not for obvious reasons leave the island and abandon the old gentleman to his fate, and yet it seemed useless to remain there looking for him, when he might have been spirited away elsewhere.

Suddenly one of the crew, who had been loitering behind, came into view waving something in his hand. As he approached we could see that it was a sheet of paper, and when he gave it into my hands I read as follows:—

"If you cross the island to the north beach you will find a small cliff in which is a large cave, a little above high-water mark. There you will discover the man for whom you are searching."

There was no signature to this epistle, and the writing was quite unfamiliar to me, but I had no reason to doubt its authenticity.

"Where did you discover this?" I inquired of the man who had brought it.

"Fastened to one of them prickly bushes up on the beach there, sir," he answered.

"Well, the only thing for us to do now is to set off to the north shore and hunt for the cave. Two of you had better take

the boat back to the yacht and ask the captain to follow us round.”

As soon as the boat was under weigh we picked up our rifles and set off for the north beach. It was swelteringly hot by this time, and, as may be imagined, we were all dead tired after our long night's work. However, the men knew they would be amply rewarded if we could effect the rescue of the man for whom we had been searching, so they pushed on.

At last we turned the cape and entered the bay which constituted the north end of the island. It was not a large beach on this side, but it had, at its western end, a curious line of small cliffs, in the centre of which a small black spot could be discerned looking remarkably like the entrance to a cave. Towards this we pressed, forgetting our weariness in the excitement of the search.

It *was* a cave, and a large one. So far the letter was correct. Preparing ourselves, in case of surprise, we approached the entrance, calling Mr. Wetherell's name. As our shouts died away a voice came out in answer, and thereupon we rushed in.

A remarkable sight met our eyes. In the centre of the cave was a stout upright post, some six or eight feet in height, and securely tied to this was the Colonial Secretary of New South Wales.

In less time almost than it takes to tell, we had cast loose the ropes which bound him, and led him, for he was too weak to stand alone, out into the open air. While he was resting he inquired after his daughter, and having learned that she was safe, gave us the following explanation. Addressing himself to me he said:

“When you cried ‘Make for the boats,’ I ran up the hill with the others as fast as I could go; but I’m an old man and could not get along as quickly as I wanted to, and for this reason was soon left far behind. I must have been half-way down the hill when a tall man, dressed in white, stepped out from behind a bush, and raising a rifle bade me come to a standstill. Having no time to lift my own weapon I was obliged to do as he ordered me, and he thereupon told me to lay down my weapon and right-about face. In this fashion I was marched back to the huts we had just left, and then, another man having joined my captor, was conducted across the island to this beach, where a boat was in waiting. In it I was pulled out to a small schooner lying at anchor in the bay and ordered to board her; five minutes later I was conducted to the saloon.

“Good-evening, Mr. Wetherell. This is indeed a pleasure,’ said a man sitting at the farther end of the table. He was playing with a big black cat, and directly I heard his voice I knew that I was in the presence of Dr. Nikola.

“And how do you think I am going to punish you, my friend, for giving me all this trouble?’ he said when I made no reply to his first remark.

“You dare not do anything to me,’ I answered. ‘I demand that you let me go this instant. I have a big score to settle with you.’

“If you will be warned by me you will cease to demand,’ he answered, his eyes the while burning like coals. ‘You are an obstinate man, but though you have put me to so much trouble and expense I will forgive you and come to terms with you. Now listen to me. If you will give me ——’

“At that moment the little vessel gave a heavy roll, and in trying to keep my footing on the sloping deck I fell over upon the table. As I did so the little Chinese stick slipped out of my pocket and went rolling along directly into Nikola's hands. He sprang forward and seized it, and you may imagine his delight. With a cry of triumph that made the cat leap from his shoulder, he turned to a tall man by his side and said:

“I’ve got it at last! Now let a boat's crew take this man ashore and tie him to the stake in the cave. Then devise some means of acquainting his friends of his whereabouts. Be quick, for we sail in an hour.’ Having given these orders he turned to me again and said:

“Mr. Wetherell, this is the last transaction we shall probably ever have together. All things considered, you are lucky in escaping so easily. It would have saved you a good deal if you had complied with my request at first. However, all's well that ends well, and I congratulate you upon your charming daughter. Now, good-bye; in an hour I am off to effect a *coup* with this stick, the magnitude of which you would never dream. One last word of advice: pause a second time, I entreat, before you think of baulking Dr. Nikola.’

“I was going to reply, when I was twisted round and led up on deck, where that scoundrel Baxter had the impudence to make me a low bow. In less than a quarter of an hour I was fastened to the post in that cave. The rest you know. Now let us get on board; I see the boat is approaching.”

As soon as the surf-boat had drawn up on the beach we embarked and were pulled out to the yacht. In a few moments we were on deck, and Phyllis was in her father's arms again. By mid-day the island had disappeared under the sea line, and

by nightfall we were well on our way back to Sydney.

That evening, after dinner, Phyllis and I patrolled the deck together, and finally came to a standstill aft. It was as beautiful an evening as any man or woman could desire. All round us was the glassy sea, rising and falling as if asleep, while overhead the tropic stars shone down with their wonderful brilliance.

"Phyllis," I said, taking my darling's hand in mine and looking into her face, "what a series of adventures we have both passed through since that afternoon I first saw you in the Domain! Do you know that your father has at last consented to our marriage?"

"I do. And as it is to you, Dick, I owe my rescue," she said, coming a little closer to me, "he could do nothing else; you have a perfect right to me."

"I have, and I mean to assert it!" I answered. "If I had not found you, I should never have been happy again."

"But, Dick, there is one thing I don't at all understand. At dinner this evening the captain addressed you as Sir Richard. What does that mean?"

"Why, of course you have not heard!" I cried. "Well, I think it means that though I cannot make you a marchioness, I can make you a baronet's wife. It remains with you to say whether you will be Lady Hatteras or not." Then I explained how I had inherited the title and estates.

Her only reply was to kiss me softly on the cheek.

She had scarcely done so before her father and Beckenham came along the deck.

"Now, Phyllis," said the former, leading her to a seat, "supposing you give us the history of your adventures. Remember we have heard nothing yet."

"Very well. Where shall I begin? At the moment I left the house for the ball? Very good. Well, you must know that when I arrived at Government House I met Mrs. Mayford — the lady who had promised to chaperone me — in the cloak-room, and we passed into the ball-room together. I danced the first dance with Captain Hackworth, one of the *aides*, and engaged myself for the fourth to the Marquis of Beckenham."

"The sham Marquis, unfortunately," put in the real one.

"It proved to be unfortunate for me also," continued Phyllis. "As it was a square we sat it out in the ante-room leading off the drawing-room, and while we were there the young gentleman did me the honour of proposing to me. It was terribly embarrassing for me, but I allowed him to see, as unmistakably as possible, that I could give him no encouragement, and, as the introduction to the next waltz started, we parted the best of friends. About half an hour later, just as I was going to dance the lancers, Mrs. Mayford came towards me and drew me into the drawing-room. Mr. Baxter, his lordship's tutor, was with her, and I noticed that they both looked supernaturally grave."

"What is the matter?" I asked, becoming alarmed by her face.

"My dear," said she, "you must be brave. I have come to tell you that your father has been taken ill, and has sent for you."

"Papa ill!" I cried. "Oh, I must go home to him at once!"

"I have taken the liberty of facilitating that," said Mr. Baxter, "by ordering the servants to call up your carriage, which is now waiting for you at the door. If you will allow me, I will conduct you to it?"

"I apologized to my partner for being compelled to leave him, and then went to the cloak-room. As soon as I was ready I accompanied Mr. Baxter to the door, where the brougham was waiting. Without looking at the coachman I got in, at the same time thanking my escort for his kindness. He shut the door and cried 'Home' to the coachman. Next moment we were spinning down the drive."

"As I was far too much occupied thinking of you, papa, I did not notice the direction we were taking, and it was not until the carriage stopped before a house in a back street that I realized that something was wrong. Then the door was opened, and a gentleman in evening dress begged me to alight. I did so, almost without thinking what I was doing."

"I am sorry to say your father is not at all well, Miss Wetherell," said the person who helped me out. "If you will be good enough to step into my house I will let the nurse take you to him."

"Like a person in a dream I followed him into the dwelling."

"Where is my father? and how is it that he is here?" I cried, beginning to get frightened.

“You will know all when you see him,” said my companion, throwing open the door of a bedroom. I went in, and that door was also shut upon me. Then I turned and faced the man.”

“What was he like?” cried Wetherell.

“He was the man you were telling us about at dinner — Dr. Nikola.”

“Ah! And then?”

“He politely but firmly informed me that I was his prisoner, and that until you gave up something he had for years been trying to obtain he would be compelled to detain me. I threatened, entreated, and finally wept, but he was not to be moved. He promised that no effort should be spared to make me comfortable, but he could not let me go until you had complied with his request. So I was kept there until late one night, when I was informed that I must be ready to leave the house. A brougham was at the door and in this, securely guarded, I was conducted to the harbour, where a boat was in waiting. In this we were rowed out to a schooner, and I was placed on board her. A comfortably furnished cabin was allotted to me, and everything I could possibly want was given me. But though the greatest consideration in all other matters was shown me, I could gather nothing of where we were going or what my fate was to be, nor could I discover any means of communicating with the shore. About midnight we got under weigh and commenced our voyage. Our destination was the island where you found me.”

“And how did Nikola treat you during the voyage and your stay on Pipa Lannu?” I asked.

“With invariable courtesy,” she replied. “A more admirable host no one could desire. I had but to express a wish, and it was instantly gratified. When we were clear of the land I was allowed on deck; my meals were served to me in a cabin adjoining my own, and a stewardess had been specially engaged to wait upon me. As far as my own treatment went, I have nothing to complain of. But oh, you can’t tell how thankful I was to get away; I imagined all sorts of horrors.”

“Well, God be thanked, it’s all done with now,” I said earnestly.

“And what is more,” said Wetherell, “you have won one of the best husbands in the world. Mr. Hatteras, your hand, sir; Phyllis, my darling, yours! God bless you both.”

A week later the eventful voyage was over, and we were back in Sydney again.

Then came our marriage. But, with your kind permission, I will only give you a very bare description of that. It took place at the cathedral, the Primate officiating. The Marquis of Beckenham was kind enough to act as my best man, while the Colonial Secretary, of course, gave his daughter away.

But now I come to think of it, there is one point I *must* touch upon in connexion with that happy occasion, and that was the arrival of an important present on the evening prior to the event.

We were sitting in the drawing-room when the butler brought in a square parcel on a salver and handed it to Phyllis. “Another present, I expect,” she said, and began to untie the string that bound it.

When the first cover was removed a layer of tissue paper revealed itself, and after that a large Russia leather case came into view. On pressing the spring the cover lifted and revealed a superb *collet*— as I believe it is called — of diamonds, and resting against the lid a small card bearing this inscription:—

“With heartiest congratulations and best wishes to Lady Hatteras, in memory of an unfortunate detention and a voyage to the Southern Seas,

“From her sincere admirer,

“Dr. Nikola.”

What do you think of that?

Well, to bring my long story to a close, the Great Event passed off with much *éclat*. We spent our honeymoon in the Blue Mountains, and a fortnight later sailed once more for England in the *Orizaba*. Both Mr. Wetherell — who has now resigned office — and the Marquis of Beckenham, who is as manly a fellow as you would meet anywhere in England, accompanied us home, and it was to the latter’s seaside residence that we went immediately on our arrival in the mother country. My own New Forest residence is being thoroughly renovated, and will be ready for occupation in the spring.

And now as to the other persons who have figured most prominently in my narrative. Of Nikola, Baxter, Eastover, or Prendergast I have never heard since. What gigantic *coup* the first-named intends to accomplish with the little Chinese

stick, the possession of which proved so fatal to Wetherell, is beyond my power to tell. I am only too thankful, however, that I am able to say that I am not in the least concerned in it. I am afraid of Nikola, and I confess it. And with this honest expression of my feelings, and my thanks for your attention and forbearance, I will beg your permission to ring the curtain down upon the narrative of my Bid for Fortune.

Chapter 16. INTRODUCTION

My Dear William George Craigie--

I have no doubt as to your surprise at receiving this letter, after so long and unjustifiable a period of silence, from one whom you must have come to consider either a dead man or at least a permanent refugee. When last we met it was on the deck of Tremorden's yacht, in the harbour of Honolulu. I had been down to Kauai, I remember, and the day following, you, you lucky dog, were going off to England by the Royal Mail to be married to the girl of your heart. Since then I have heard, quite by chance, that you have settled down to a country life, as if to the manner born; that you take an absorbing interest in mangel-wurzels, and, while you strike terror into the hearts of poachers and other rustic evil-doers, have the reputation of making your wife the very best of husbands. Consequently you are to be envied and considered one of the happiest of men.

While, however, things have been behaving thus prosperously with you, I am afraid I cannot truthfully say that they have fared so well with me. At the termination of our pleasant South Sea cruise, just referred to, when our party dismembered itself in the Sandwich Islands, I crossed to Sydney, passed up inside the Barrier Reef to Cooktown, where I remained three months in order to try my luck upon the Palmer Gold Fields. This proving unsatisfactory I returned to the coast and continued my journey north to Thursday Island. From the last-named little spot I visited New Guinea, gave it my patronage for the better part of six months, and received in return a bad attack of fever, after recovering from which I migrated to Borneo, to bring up finally, as you will suppose, in my beloved China.

Do you remember how in the old days, when we both held positions of more or less importance in Hong-Kong, you used to rally me about my fondness for the Celestial character and my absurd liking for going *fantee* into the queerest company and places? How little did I imagine then to what straits that craze would ultimately conduct me! But we never know what the future has in store for us, do we? And perhaps it is as well.

You will observe, my dear Craigie, that it is the record of my visit to China on this particular occasion that constitutes this book; and you must also understand that it is because of our long friendship for each other, and by reason of our queer researches into the occult world together, that you find your name placed so conspicuously upon the forefront of it.

A word now as to my present existence and abode. My location I cannot reveal even to you. And believe me I make this reservation for the strongest reasons. Suffice it that I own a farm, of close upon five thousand acres, in a country such as would gladden your heart, if matrimony and continued well-being have not spoilt your eyes for richness of soil. It is shut in on all sides by precipitous mountain ranges, on the western peaks of which at this moment, as I sit in my verandah writing to you, a quantity of cloud, tinted a rose pink by the setting sun, is gathering. A quieter spot, and one more remote from the rush and bustle of civilization, it would be difficult to find. Once every six months my stores are brought up to me on mule-back by a trusted retainer who has never spoken a word of English in his life, and once every six weeks I send to, and receive from, my post office, four hundred miles distant, my mails. In the intervals I imitate the patriarchal life and character; that is to say, I hoe and reap my corn, live in harmony with my neighbour, who is two hundred odd miles away, and, figuratively speaking, enjoy life beneath my own vine and fig-tree.

Perhaps when the cool west wind blows in the long grass, the wild duck whistle upon the lagoons, or a newspaper filled with gossip of the outer world finds its way in to me, I am a little restless, but at other times I can safely say I have few regrets. I have done with the world, and to make my exile easier I have been permitted that greatest of all blessings, a good wife. Who she is and how I won her you will discover when you have perused this narrative, the compiling of which has been my principal and, I might almost say, only recreation all through our more than tedious winter. But now the snow has departed, spring is upon us, clad in its mantle of luscious grass and accompanied by the twitterings of birds and the music of innumerable small waterfalls, and I am a new man. All nature is busy, the swallows are working overtime beneath the eaves, and to-morrow, in proof of my remembrance, this book goes off to you.

Whether I shall ever again see Dr. Nikola, the principal character in it, is more than I can tell you. But I sincerely trust not. It is for the sake of circumstances brought about by that extraordinary man that I have doomed myself to perpetual

exile; still I have no desire that he should know of my sacrifice. Sometimes when I lie awake in the quiet watches of the night I can hardly believe that the events of the last two years are real. The horror of that time still presses heavily upon me, and if I live to be a hundred I doubt if I shall outgrow it. When I tell you that even the things, I mean the mysteries and weird experiences, into which we thrust our impertinent noses in bygone days were absolutely as nothing compared with those I have passed through since in Nikola's company, you will at first feel inclined to believe that I am romancing. But I know this, that by the time you have got my curious story by heart all doubt on that score will have been swept away.

One last entreaty. Having read this book, do not attempt to find me, or to set my position right with the world. Take my word for it, it is better as it is.

And now, without further preamble, let us come to the story itself. God bless you, and give you every happiness. Speak kindly of me to your wife, and believe me until death finishes my career, if it does such a thing, which Dr. Nikola would have me doubt,

Your affectionate friend,
Wilfred Bruce.



CHAPTER 17. HOW I CAME TO MEET DR. NIKOLA

It was Saturday afternoon, about a quarter-past four o'clock if my memory serves me, and the road, known as the Maloo, leading to the Bubbling Well, that single breathing place of Shanghai, was crowded. Fashionable barouches, C-spring buggies, spider-wheel dogcarts, to say nothing of every species of 'rickshaw, bicycle, and pony, were following each other in one long procession towards the Well. All the European portion of Shanghai, and a considerable percentage of the native, had turned out to witness the finish of the paper hunt, which, though, not exciting in itself, was important as being the only amusement the settlement boasted that afternoon. I had walked as far as the Horse Bazaar myself, and had taken a 'rickshaw thence, more from pride than because I could afford it. To tell the truth, which will pop out sooner or later, however much I may try to prevent it, I was keeping up appearances, and though I lay back in my vehicle and smoked my cheroot with a princely air, I was painfully conscious of the fact that when the ride should be paid for the exchequer would scarcely survive the shock.

Since my arrival in Shanghai I had been more than usually unfortunate. I had tried for every billet then vacant, from those choice pickings at the top of the tree among the high gods, to the secretaryship of a Eurasian hub of communistical tendencies located somewhere on the confines of the native city, but always without success. For the one I had not the necessary influence, for the other I lacked that peculiar gift of obsequiousness which is so essential to prosperity in that particular line of business.

In the meantime my expenditure was going remorselessly on, and I very soon saw that unless something happened, and that quickly too, I had every prospect of hiding myself deprived of my belongings, sleeping on the Bund, and finally figuring in that Mixed Court in the Magistrate's Yamen, which is so justly dreaded by every Englishman, as the debtor of a Cochin China Jew. The position was not a cheerful one, look at it in whatever light I would, but I had experienced it a good many times before, and had always come out of it, if not with an increased amount of self-respect, certainly without any *very* great degree of personal embarrassment.

Arriving at the Well, I paid off my coolie and took up a position near "the last jump," which I noticed was a prepared fence and ditch of considerable awkwardness. I was only just in time, for a moment later the horses came at it with a rush; some cleared it, some refused it, while others, adopting a middle course, jumped on the top of it, blundered over, and finally sent their riders spinning over their heads into the mud at the feet of their fairest friends. It was not exactly an aesthetic picture, but it was certainly a very amusing one.

When the last horse, had landed, imagining the sport to be over for the day, I was in the act of moving away when there was a shout to stand clear, and wheeling round again, I was just in time to see a last horseman come dashing at the fence. Though he rode with considerable determination, and was evidently bent on putting a good finish to his day's amusement, it was plain that his horse was not of the same way of thinking, for, when he was distant about half a dozen yards from the fence, he broke his stride, stuck his feet into the mud, and endeavoured to come to a standstill. The result was not at all what he expected; he slid towards the fence, received his rider's *quirt*, viciously administered, round his flank, made up his mind to jump too late, hit the top rail with his forehead, turned a complete somersault, and landed with a crash at my feet. His rider fell into the arms of the ditch, out of which I presently dragged him. When I got him on the bank he did not look a pretty sight, but, on the other hand, that did not prevent him from recognizing me.

"Wilfred Bruce, by all that's glorious!" he cried, at the same time rising to his feet and mopping his streaming face with a very muddy pocket-handkerchief. "This is a fortunate encounter, for do you know, I spent two hours this morning looking for you?"

"I am very sorry you should have had so much trouble," I answered; "but are you sure you are not hurt?"

"Not in the least," he answered, and when he had scraped off as much mud as possible, turned to his horse, which had struggled to his feet and was gazing stupidly about him.

"Let me first send this clumsy brute home," he said, "then I'll find my cart, and if you'll permit me I'll take you back to town with me."

We saw the horse led away, and, when we had discovered his dog-cart among the crowd of vehicles waiting for their owners, mounted to our seats and set off--after a few preliminary antics on the part of the leader--on our return to the

settlement.

Once comfortably on our way George Barkston, whom, I might mention here, I had known for more than ten years, placed his whip in the bucket and turned to me.

"Look here, Bruce," he said, flushing a little in anticipation of what he was about to say, "I'm not going to mince matters with you, so let us come straight to the point; we are old friends, and though we've not seen as much of each other during this visit to Shanghai as we used to do in the old days when you were deputy-commissioner of whatever it was, and I was your graceless subordinate, I think I am pretty well conversant with your present condition. I don't want you to consider me impertinent, but I *do* want you to let me help you if I can."

"That's very good of you," I answered, not without a little tremor, however, as he shaved a well-built American buggy by a hair's breadth. "To tell the honest truth, I want to get something to do pretty badly. There's a serious deficit in the exchequer, my boy. And though I'm a fairly old hand at the game of poverty, I've still a sort of pride left, and I have no desire to figure in the Mixed Court next Wednesday on a charge of inability to pay my landlord twenty dollars for board and lodging."

"Of course you don't," said Barkston warmly; "and so, if you'll let me help you, I've an idea that I can put you on to the right track to something. The fact is, there was a chap in the smoking-room at the club the other night with whom I got into conversation. He interested me more than I can tell you, for he was one of the most curious beings who, I should imagine, has ever visited the East. I never saw such an odd-looking fellow in my life. Talk about eyes--well, his were--augh! Why, he looked you through and through. You know old Benwell, of the revenue-cutter *Y-chang*? Well, while I was talking to this fellow, after a game of pool, in he came.

"Hallo! Barkston," he said, as he brought up alongside the table, 'I thought you were shooting with Jimmy Woodrough up the river? I'm glad to find you're not, for I----' He had got as far as this before he became aware of my companion. Then his jaw dropped; he looked hard at him, said something under his breath, and, shaking me by the hand, made a feeble excuse, and fled the room. Not being able to make it out at all, I went after him and found him looking for his hat in the hall. 'Come, I say, Benwell, I cried; what's up? What on earth made you bolt like that? Have I offended you?' He led me on one side, so that the servants should not hear, and having done so said confidentially: 'Barkston, I am not a coward; in my time I've tackled Europeans, Zulus, Somalis, Malays, Japanese, and Chinese, to say nothing of Manilla and Solomon boys, and what's more, I don't mind facing them all again; but when I find myself face to face with Dr. Nikola, well, I tell you I don't think twice, I bolt! Take my tip and do the same.' As he might just as well have talked to me in low Dutch for all I should have understood, I tried to question him, but I might have spared myself the trouble, for I could get nothing satisfactory out of him. He simply shook me by the hand, told the boy in the hall to call him a 'rickshaw, and as soon as it drew up at the steps jumped into it and departed. When I got back to the billiard-room Nikola was still there, practising losing hazards of extraordinary difficulty.

"I've an opinion I've seen your friend before," he said, as I sat down to watch him. 'He is Benwell of the *Y-chang*, and if I mistake not Benwell of the *Y-chang* remembers me.'

"He seems to know you," I said with a laugh.

"Yes, Nikola continued after a little pause; 'I have had the pleasure of being in Mr. Benwell's company once before. It was in Haiphong.' Then with peculiar emphasis: 'I don't know what he thinks of the place, of course, but somehow I have an idea your friend will not willingly go near Haiphong again.' After he had said this he remained silent for a little while, then he took a letter from his pocket, read it carefully, examined the envelope, and having made up his mind on a certain point turned to me again.

"I want to ask you a question," he said, putting the cue he had been using back into the rack. 'You know a person named Bruce, don't you? a man who used to be in the Civil Service, and who has the reputation of being able to disguise himself so like a Chinaman that even Li Chang Tung would not know him for a European?'

"I do," I answered; 'he is an old friend of mine; and what is more, he is in Shanghai at the present moment. It was only this morning I heard of him.'

"Bring him to me," said Nikola quickly. 'I am told he wants a billet, and if he sees me before twelve to-morrow night I think I can put him in the way of obtaining a good one. Now there you are, Bruce, my boy. I have done my best for you.'

"And I am sincerely grateful to you," I answered. "But who is this man Nikola, and what sort of a billet do you think he

can find me?"

"Who he is I can no more tell you than I can fly. But if he is not the first cousin of the Old Gentleman himself, well, all I can say is, I'm no hand at finding relationships."

"I am afraid that doesn't tell me very much," I answered. "What's he like to look at?"

"Well, in appearance he might be described as tall, though you must not run away with the idea that he's what you would call a big man. On the contrary, he is most slenderly built. Anything like the symmetry of his figure, however, I don't remember to have met with before. His face is clean shaven, and is always deadly pale, a sort of toad-skin pallor, that strikes you directly when you see him and the remembrance of which never leaves you again. His eyes and hair are as black as night, and he is as neat and natty as a new pin. When he is watching you he seems to be looking through the back of your head into the wall behind, and when he speaks you've just got to pay attention, whether you want to or not. All things considered, the less I see of him the better I shall like him."

"You don't give me a very encouraging report of my new employer. What on earth can he want with me?"

"He's Apollyon himself," laughed Barkston, "and wants a *maitre d'hotel*. I suppose he imagines you'll suit."

By this time we had left the Maloo and were entering the town.

"Where shall I find this extraordinary man?" I asked, as we drew near the place where I intended to alight.

"We'll drive to the club and see if he's there," said Barkston, whipping up his horses. "But, putting all joking aside, he really seemed most anxious to find you, and as he knew I was going to look for you I don't doubt that he will have left some message for one of us there."

Having reached the Wanderers' Club, which is too well known to need any description here, Barkston went inside, leaving me to look after the horses. Five minutes later he emerged again, carrying a letter in his hand.

"Nikola was here until ten minutes ago," he said, with a disappointed expression upon his handsome face; "unfortunately he's gone home now, but has left this note for me. If I find you he begs that I will send you on to his bungalow without delay. I have discovered that it is Fere's old place in the French Concession, Rue de la Fayette; you know it, the third house on the right hand side, just past where that renegade French marquis shot his wife. If you would care about it I'll give you a note to him, and you can dine, think it over quietly, and then take it on yourself this evening or not, as pleases you best."

"That would be the better plan," I said. "I should like to have a little time to collect my thoughts before seeing him."

Thereupon Barkston went back into the building, and when he returned, which was in something under a quarter of an hour, he brought the letter he had promised me in his hand. He jumped up and took the reins, the Chinese groom sprang out of the way, and we were off.

"Can I drive you round to where you are staying?" he asked.

"I don't think you can," I answered, "and for reasons which would be sure to commend themselves to you if I were to tell them. But I am very much obliged to you all the same. As to Nikola, I'll think the whole matter carefully out this evening, and, if I approve, after dinner I'll walk over and present this letter personally."

I thereupon descended from the dogcart at the corner of the road, and having again thanked my friend for the kindness he had shown me, bade him good-bye and took myself off.

Reaching the Bund I sat myself down on a seat beneath a tree and dispassionately reviewed the situation. All things considered it was a pretty complicated one. Though I had not revealed as much to Barkston, who had derived such happiness from his position of guide, philosopher, and friend, this was not the first time I had heard of Nikola. Such a strange personality as his could not expect to go unremarked in a gossip-loving community such as the East, and all sorts of stories had accordingly been circulated concerning him. Though I knew my fellow-man too well to place credence in half of what I had heard, it was impossible for me to prevent myself from feeling a considerable amount of curiosity about the man.

Leaving the Bund I returned to my lodgings, had my tea, and about eight o'clock donned my hat again and set off in the direction of the French Concession. It was not a pleasant night, being unusually dark and inclined towards showery. The wind blew in fitful gusts, and drove the dust like hail against one's face. Though I stood a good chance of obtaining what I wanted so much--employment, I cannot affirm with any degree of truth that I felt easy in my mind. Was I not

seeking to become connected with a man who was almost universally feared, and whose reputation was not such as would make most people desire a closer acquaintance with him? This thought in itself was not of a reassuring nature. But in the face of my poverty I could not afford to be too squeamish. So leaving the Rue de la Paix on my left hand I turned into the Rue de la Fayette, where Nikola's bungalow was situated, and having picked it out from its fellows, made my way towards it.

The compound and the house itself were in total darkness, but after I had twice knocked at the door a light came slowly down the passage towards me. The door was opened, and a China boy stood before me holding a candle in his hand.

"Does Dr. Nikola live here?" I inquired, in very much the same tone as our boyhood's hero, Jack of Beanstalk climbing fame, might have used when he asked to be admitted to the residence of the giant Fee-fo-fum. The boy nodded, whereupon I handed him my letter, and ordered him to convey it to his master without delay. With such celerity did he accomplish his mission that in less than two minutes he had returned and was beckoning me to follow him. Accordingly I accompanied him down the passage towards a small room on the left hand side. When I had entered it the door was immediately closed behind me. There was no one in the apartment, and I was thus permitted an opportunity of examining it to my satisfaction, and drawing my own conclusions before Dr Nikola should enter.

As I have said, it was not large, nor was its furniture, with a few exceptions, in any way extraordinary. The greater part of it was of the usual bungalow type, neither better nor worse. On the left hand as one entered was a window, which I observed was heavily barred and shuttered; between that and the door stood a tall bookshelf, filled with works, standard and otherwise, on almost every conceivable subject, from the elementary principles of Bimetallism to abstract Confucianism. A thick matting covered the floor and a heavy curtain sheltered a doorway on the side opposite to that by which I had entered. On the walls were several fine engravings, but I noticed that they were all based on uncommon subjects, such as the visit of Saul to the Witch of Endor, a performance of the magicians before Pharaoh, and the converting of the dry bones into men in the desert. A clock ticked on the bookcase, but with that exception there was nothing to disturb the silence of the room.

I suppose I must have waited fully five minutes before my ears caught the sound of a soft footstep in an adjoining apartment, then the second door opened, the curtain which covered it was drawn slowly aside, and a man, who could have been none other than Dr. Nikola, made his appearance. His description was exactly what Barkston had given me, even to the peculiar eyes and, what proved to be an apt illustration, the white toad-coloured skin. He was attired in faultless evening dress, and its deep black harmonized well with his dark eyes and hair. What his age might have been I could not possibly tell, but I afterwards discovered that he was barely thirty-eight. He crossed the room to where I stood, holding out his hand as he did so and saying--

"Mr. Wilfred Bruce?"

"That is my name," I answered, "and I believe you are Dr. Nikola?"

"Exactly," he said, "I am Dr. Nikola; and now that we know each other, shall we proceed to business?"

As he spoke he moved with that peculiar grace which always characterized him across to the door by which he had entered, and having opened it, signed to me to pass through. I did so, and found myself in another large room, possibly forty feet long by twenty wide. At the further end was a lofty window, containing some good stained glass; the walls were hung with Japanese tapestry, and were ornamented with swords, battle-axes, two or three specimens of Rajput armour, books galore, and a quantity of exceedingly valuable china. The apartment was lit by three hanging lamps of rare workmanship and design, while scattered about the room were numberless cushioned chairs and divans, beside one of which I noticed a beautifully inlaid huqa of a certain shape and make that I had never before seen out of Istamboul.

"Pray sit down," said Dr. Nikola, and as he spoke he signed me to a chair at the further end. I seated myself and wondered what would come next.

"This is not your first visit to China, I am given to understand," he continued, as he seated himself in a chair opposite mine, and regarded me steadfastly with his extraordinary eyes.

"It is not," I answered. "I am an old resident in the East, and I think I may say I know China as well as any living Englishman."

"Quite so. You were present at the meeting at Quong Sha's house in the Wanhshien on the 23rd August, 1907, if I remember aright, and you assisted Mah Poo to evade capture by the mandarins the week following."

"How on earth did you know that?" I asked, my surprise quite getting the better of me, for I had always been convinced that no other soul, save the man himself, was aware of my participation in that affair.

"One becomes aware of many strange things in the East," said Nikola, hugging his knee and looking at me over the top of it, "and yet that little circumstance I have just referred to is apt to teach one how much one might know, and how small after all our knowledge is of each other's lives. One could almost expect as much from brute beasts."

"I am afraid I don't quite follow you," I said simply.

"Don't you?" he answered. "And yet it is very simple after all. Let me give you a practical illustration of my meaning. If you see anything in it other than I intend, the blame must be upon your own head."

Upon a table close to his chair lay a large sheet of white paper. This he placed upon the floor. He then took a stick of charcoal in his hand and presently uttered a long and very peculiar whistle. Next moment, without any warning, an enormous cat, black as his master's coat, leapt down from somewhere on to the floor, and stood swishing his tail before us.

"There are some people in the world," said Nikola calmly, at the same time stroking the great beast's soft back, "who would endeavour to convince you that this cat is my familiar spirit, and that, with his assistance, I work all sorts of extraordinary magic. You, of course, would not be so silly as to believe such idle tales. But to bear out what I was saying just now let us try an experiment with his assistance. It is just possible I may be able to tell you something more of your life."

Here he stooped and wrote a number of figures up to ten with the charcoal upon the paper, duplicating them in a line below. He then took the cat upon his knee, stroked it carefully, and finally whispered something in its ear. Instantly the brute sprang down, placed its right fore-paw on one of the numerals of the top row, while, whether by chance or magic I cannot say, it performed a similar action with its left on the row below.

"Twenty-four," said Nikola, with one of his peculiar smiles.

Then taking the piece of charcoal once more in his hand, and turning the paper over, he wrote upon it the names of the different months of the year. Placing it on the floor he again said something to the cat, who this time stood upon June. The alphabet followed, and letter by letter the uncanny beast spelt out "Apia."

"On the 24th June," said Nikola, "of a year undetermined you were in Apia. Let us see if we can discover the year."

Again he wrote the numerals up to ten, and immediately the cat, with fiendish precision, worked out 1895.

"Is that correct?" asked this extraordinary person when the brute had finished its performance.

It was quite correct, and I told him so.

"I'm glad of that. And now do you want to know any more?" he asked. "If you wish it I might perhaps be able to tell you your business there."

I did not want to know. And I can only ask you to believe that I had very good reasons for not doing so. Nikola laughed softly, and pressed the tips of his long white fingers together as he looked at me.

"Now tell me truthfully what you think of my cat?" said he.

"One might be excused if one endowed him with Satanic attributes," I answered.

"And yet, though you think it so wonderful, it is only because I have subjected him to a curious form of education. There is a power latent in animals, and particularly in cats, which few of us suspect. And if animals have this power, how much more may men be expected to possess it. Do you know, Mr. Bruce, I should be very interested to find out exactly how far you think the human intelligence can go; that is to say, how far you think it can penetrate into the regions of what is generally called the occult?"

"Again I must make the excuse," I said, "that I do not follow you."

"Well, then, let me place it before you in a rather simpler form. If I may put it so bluntly, where should you be inclined to say this world begins and ends?"

"I should say," I replied--this time without hesitation--"that it begins with birth and ends with death."

"And after death?"

"Well, what happens then is a question of theology, and one for the parsons to decide."

"You have no individual opinion?"

"I have the remnants of what I learned as a boy."

"I see; in that case you believe that as soon as the breath has forsaken this mortal body a certain indescribable part of us, which for the sake of argument we will denominate soul, leaves this mundane sphere and enters upon a new existence in one or other of two places?"

"That is certainly what I was taught," I answered.

"Quite so; that was the teaching you received in the parish of High Walcombe, Somersetshire, and might be taken as a very good type of what your class thinks throughout the world, from the Archbishop of Canterbury down to the farm labourer's child who walks three miles every seventh day to attend Sunday school. But in that self-same village, if I remember rightly, there was a little man of portly build whose adherents numbered precisely forty-five souls; he was called Father O'Rorke, and I have not the slightest doubt, if you had asked him, he would have given you quite a different account of what becomes of that soul, or essence, if we may so call it, after it has left this mortal body. Tobias Smallcombe, who preaches in a spasmodic, windy way on the green to a congregation made up of a few enthusiasts, a dozen small boys, and a handful of donkeys and goats, will give you yet another, and so on through numberless varieties of creeds to the end of the chapter. Each will claim the privilege of being right, and each will want you to believe exactly as he does. But at the same time we must remember, provided we would be quite fair, that there are not wanting scientists, admittedly the cleverest men of the day, who assert that, while all our friends are agreed that there is a life after death--a spirit world, in fact--they are all wrong. If you will allow me to give you my own idea of what you think, I should say that your opinion is, that when you've done with the solid flesh that makes up Wilfred Bruce it doesn't much matter what happens. But let us suppose that Wilfred Bruce, or his mind, shall we say?--that part of him at any rate which is anxious, which thinks and which suffers--is destined to exist afterwards through endless aeons, a prey to continual remorse for all misdeeds: how would he regard death then?"

"But before you can expect an answer to that question it is necessary that you should prove that he does so continue to exist," I said.

"That's exactly what I desire and intend to do," said Nikola, "and it is to that end I have sought you out, and we are arguing in this fashion now. Is your time very fully occupied at present?"

I smiled.

"I quite understand," he said. "Well, I have got a proposition to make to you, if you will listen to me. Years ago and quite by chance, when the subject we are now discussing, and in which I am more interested than you can imagine, was first brought properly under my notice, I fell into the company of a most extraordinary man. He was originally an Oxford don, but for some reason he went wrong, and was afterwards shot by Balmaceda at Santiago during the Chilian war. Among other places, he had lived for many years in North-Western China. He possessed one of the queerest personalities, but he told me some wonderful things, and what was more to the point, he backed them with proofs. You would probably have called them clever conjuring tricks. So did I then, but I don't now. Nor do I think will you when I have done with you. It was from that man and an old Buddhist priest, with whom I spent some time in Ceylon, that I learnt the tiny fact which put me on the trail of what I am now following up. I have tracked it clue by clue, carefully and laboriously, with varying success for eight long years, and at last I am in the position to say that I believe I have my thumb upon the key-note. If I can press it down and obtain the result I want, I can put myself in possession of information the magnitude of which the world--I mean the European world, of course--has not the slightest conception. I am a courageous man, but I will confess that the prospect of what I am about to attempt almost frightens *me*. It is neither more nor less than to penetrate, with the help of certain Chinese secret societies, into the most extraordinary seat of learning that you or any other men ever heard of, and when there to beg, borrow, or steal the marvellous secrets they possess. I cannot go alone, for a hundred reasons, therefore I must find a man to accompany me; that man must be one in a thousand, and he must also necessarily be a consummate Chinese scholar. He must be plucky beyond the average, he must be capable of disguising himself so that his nationality shall never for a moment be suspected, and he must go fully convinced in his own mind that he will never return. If he is prepared to undertake so much I am prepared to be generous. I will pay him £5,000 down before we start and £5,000 when we return, if return we do. What do you say to that?"

I didn't know what to say. The magnitude of the proposal, to leave the value of the honorarium out of the question, completely staggered me. I wanted money more than I had ever done in my life before, and this was a sum beyond even my

wildest dreams; I also had no objection to adventure, but at the same time I must confess this seemed too foolhardy an undertaking altogether.

“What can I say?” I answered. “It’s such an extraordinary proposition.”

“So it is,” he said. “But as I take it, we are both extraordinary men. Had you been one of life’s rank and file I should not be discussing it with you now. I would think twice before I refused if I were you; Shanghai is such an unpleasant place to get into trouble in, and besides that, you know, next Wednesday will see the end of your money, even if you do sell your watch and chain, as you proposed to yourself to-night.”

He said this with such an air of innocence that for the moment it did not strike me to wonder how he had become acquainted with the state of my finances.

“Come,” he said, “you had better say yes.”

“I should like a little more time to think it over,” I answered. “I cannot pledge myself to so much without giving it thorough consideration. Even if it were not folly on my part it would scarcely be fair to you.”

“Very good then. Go home and think about it. Come and see me to-morrow night at this time and let me have your decision. In the meantime if I were you I would say nothing about our conversation to any one.”

I assured him I would not, and then he rose, and I understood that our interview was at an end. I followed him into the hall, the black cat marching sedately at our heels. In the verandah he stopped and held out his hand, saying with an indescribable sweetness of tone--

“I hope, Mr. Bruce, you will believe that I am most anxious for your companionship. I don’t flatter you, I simply state the truth when I affirm that you are the only man in China whose co-operation I would ask. Now good-night. I hope you will come to me with a favourable answer to-morrow.”

As he spoke, and as if to emphasize his request, the black cat, which up to that time had been standing beside him, now came over and began to rub its head, accompanying its action with a soft, purring noise, against my leg.

“I will let you know without fail by this time tomorrow evening,” I said. “Good-night.”



CHAPTER 18. The OFFER

After I had bidden Dr. Nikola good-night in the verandah of his house, I consulted my watch, and discovering that it was not yet eleven o'clock, set off for a long walk through the city in order to consider my position. There were many things to be reckoned for and against his offer. To begin with, as a point in its favour, I remembered the fact that I was alone in the world. My father and mother had been dead some years, and as I was their only child, I had neither brother nor sister dependent upon my exertions, or to mourn my loss if by ill-chance anything desperate should befall me. In the second place, I had been a traveller in strange lands from my youth up, and was therefore the more accustomed to hard living. This will be better understood when I say that I had run away from home at the age of fifteen to go to sea; had spent three years in the roughest life before the mast any man could dream of or desire; had got through another five, scarcely less savage, as an Australian bushman on the borders of the Great Desert; another two in a detachment of the Cape Mounted Police; I had also held a fair appointment in Hong-Kong, and had drifted in and out of many other employments, good, bad, and indifferent. I was thirty-five years of age, had never, with the exception of my attack of fever in New Guinea, known what it was to be really sick or sorry, and, if the information is of any use to the world, weighed thirteen stone, stood close upon six feet in my stockings, had grey eyes and dark-brown hair, and, if you will not deem me conceited for saying so, had the reputation of being passably good-looking.

My position at that moment, financially and otherwise, was certainly precarious in the extreme. It was true, if I looked long enough I might find something to do, but, on the other hand, it was equally probable that I should not, for, as I knew to my cost, there were dozens of men in Shanghai at that moment, also on the look-out for employment, who would snap up anything that offered at a moment's notice. Only that morning I had been assured by a well-known merchant, upon whom I had waited in the hope of obtaining a cashiership he had vacant in his office, that he could have filled it a hundred times over before my arrival. This being so, I told myself that I had no right to neglect any opportunity which might come in my way of bettering my position. I therefore resolved not to reject Nikola's offer without the most careful consideration. Unfortunately, a love of adventure formed an integral part of my constitution, and when a temptation, such as the present, offered it was difficult for me to resist it. Indeed, this particular form of adventure appealed to me with a voice of more than usual strength. What was still more to the point, Nikola was such a born leader of men that the mysterious fascination of his manner seemed to compel me to give him my co-operation, whether I would or would not. That the enterprise was one involving the chance of death was its most unpleasant feature; but still, I told myself, I had to die some time or other, while if my luck held good, and I came out of it alive, £10,000 would render me independent for the rest of my existence. As the thought of this large sum came into my mind, the sinister form of my half-caste landlord rose before my mind's eye, and the memory of his ill-written and worse-spelled account, which I should certainly receive upon the morrow, chilled me like a cold douche. Yes, my mind was made up, I *would* go; and having come to this decision, I went home.

But when I woke next morning Prudence sat by my bedside. My dreams had not been good ones. I had seen myself poisoned in Chinese monasteries, dismembered by almond-eyed headsman before city gates, and tortured in a thousand terrible ways and places. Though these nightmares were only the natural outcome of my anxiety, yet I could not disabuse my mind of the knowledge that every one was within the sphere of probability. Directly I should have changed into Celestial dress, stained my face and sewn on my pigtail, I would be a Chinaman pure and simple, amenable to Chinese laws and liable to Chinese penalties. Then there was another point to be considered. What sort of travelling companion would Nikola prove? Would I be able to trust him in moments of danger and difficulty? Would he stand by me as one comrade should by another? And if by any chance we should get into a scrape and there should be an opportunity of escape for one only, would Nikola, by virtue of being my employer, seize that chance and leave me to brave the upshot, whatever it might be? In that case my £5,000 in the Shanghai Bank and the £5,000 which was to be paid to me on my return would be little less useful than a worn-out tobacco pouch. And this suggested to my mind another question: Was Nikola sufficiently rich to be able to pay £10,000 to a man to accompany him on such a harebrained errand? These were all matters of importance, and they were also questions that had to be satisfactorily answered before I could come to any real decision. Though Barkston had informed me that Nikola was so well known throughout the East, though Benwell, of the Chinese Revenue Service, had shown himself so frightened when he had met him face to face in the club, and though I, myself, had heard all

sorts of queer stories about him in Saigon and the Manillas, they were none of them sufficiently definite to be any guarantee to me of his monetary stability. To set my mind at rest, I determined to make inquiries about Nikola from some unbiassed person. But who was that person to be? I reviewed all my acquaintances in turn, but without pitching upon any who would be at all likely to be able to help me in my dilemma. Then, while I was dressing, I remembered a man, a merchant, owning one of the largest *hongs* along the Bund, who was supposed to know more about people in general, and queer folk in particular, than any man in China.

I ate my breakfast, such as it was, received my account from my landlord with the lordly air of one who has £10,000 reposing at his banker's, lit an excellent cigar in the verandah and then sauntered down town.

Arriving at the Bund, I walked along until I discovered my friend's office. It overlooked the river, and was as fine a building as any in Shanghai. In the main hall I had the good fortune to discover the merchant's chief *comprador*, who, having learned that his master was disengaged, conducted me forthwith to his presence.

Alexander McAndrew hailed from north of the Tweed--this fact the least observant would have noticed before he had been five minutes in his company. His father had been a night watchman at one of the Glasgow banks, and his own early youth was spent as a ragged, barefooted boy in the streets of that extraordinary city. Of his humble origin McAndrew, however, was prouder than any De la Zouch could have been of friendship with the Conqueror; indeed, he was wont, when he entertained friends at his princely bungalow in the English Concession, to recall and dwell with delight upon the sordid circumstances that brought about the happy chance which, one biting winter's morning, led him to seek fame and fortune in the East.

"Why, Mr. Bruce," he cried, rising from his chair and shaking me warmly by the hand, "this is a most unexpected pleasure! How long have you been in Shanghai?"

"Longer than I care to remember," I answered, taking the seat he offered me.

"And all that time you have never once been to see me. That's hardly fair treatment of an old friend, is it?"

"I must ask your pardon for my remissness," I said, "but somehow things have not gone well with me in Shanghai this time, and so I've not been to see anybody. You observe that I am candid with you."

"I am sorry to hear that you are in trouble," he said. "I don't want to appear impertinent, but if I can be of any service to you I sincerely hope you will command me."

"Thank you," I answered. "I have already determined to do so. Indeed, it is to consult you that I have taken the liberty of calling upon you now."

"I am glad of that. Upon what subject do you want my advice?"

"Well, to begin with, let me tell you that I have been offered a billet which is to bring me in £10,000."

"Why, I thought you said things were not prospering with you?" cried my friend. "This doesn't look as if there is much wrong. What is the billet?"

"That, I am sorry to say, I am not at liberty to reveal to any one."

"Then in what way can I be of use to you?"

"First, I want to know if you can give me any information about my employer?"

"Tell me his name and I'll see what I can do," the merchant answered, not without a show of pride. "I think I know nine out of every ten men of any importance in the East."

"Well," I said, "this man's name is Nikola."

"Nikola!" he cried in complete astonishment, wheeling round to face me. "What possible business can you have with Nikola that is to bring you in £10,000?"

"Business of the very utmost importance," I answered, "involving almost life and death. But it is evident you know him?"

In reply the old man leant over the table and sank his voice almost to a whisper.

"Bruce," he said, "I know more of that man than I dare tell you, and if you will take my advice you will back out while you have time. If you can't, why, be more than careful what arrangements you make with him."

"You frighten me," I said, more impressed by his earnestness than I cared to own. "Is he not good for the money, then?"

"Oh, as for the money, I don't doubt that he could pay it a dozen times over if he wanted to," the worthy merchant replied. "In point of fact, between ourselves, he has the power to draw upon me up to the extent of £50,000."

"He's a rich man, then?"

"Immensely!"

"But where on earth does his money come from?"

"Ah! that's a good deal more than I can tell you," he replied. "But wherever he gets it, take my advice and think twice before you put yourself into his power. Personally, and I can say it with truth, I don't fear many men, but I *do* fear Nikola, and that I'm not the only man in the world who does I will prove to you by this letter."

As he spoke he opened a drawer in his writing-table and took out a couple of sheets of notepaper. Spreading them upon the table before him, he smoothed the page and began to read.

"This letter, you must understand," he said, "is from the late Colonial Secretary of New South Wales, the Hon. Sylvester Wetherell, a personal friend of mine. I will skip the commencement, which is mainly private, and come to the main issue. He says:

"... Since I wrote to you in June last, from London, I have been passing through a time of terrible trouble. As I told you in a letter some years ago, I was brought, quite against my will, into dealings with a most peculiar person named Nikola. Some few years since I defended a man known as China Pete, in our Central Criminal Court, against a charge of murder, and, what was more, got him off. When he died, being unable to pay me, he made me a present of all he had to leave, a peculiar little stick, covered with carved Chinese characters, about which he told me a mad rigmarole, but which has since nearly proved my undoing. For some inscrutable reason this man Nikola wanted to obtain possession of this stick, and because I refused to let him have it has subjected me to such continuous persecution these few years past as to nearly drive me into a lunatic asylum. Every method that a man could possibly adopt or a demoniacal brain invent to compel me to surrender the curio he tried. You will gather something of what I mean when I tell you that my house was twice broken into by Chinese burglars, that I was garrotted within a hundred yards of my own front door, that my wife and daughter were intimidated by innumerable threatening letters, and that I was at length brought to such a pitch of nervousness that after my wife died I fled to England to escape him. Nikola followed me, drew into the plot he was weaving about me the Duke of Glenbarth, his son, the Marquis of Beckenham, Sir Richard Hatteras, who has since married my daughter, our late Governor, the Earl of Amberley, and at least a dozen other persons. Through his agency Beckenham and Hatteras were decoyed into a house in Port Said and locked up for three weeks, while a spurious nobleman was sent on in his lordship's place to Sydney to become acquainted with my daughter, and finally to solicit her hand in marriage. Fortunately, however, Sir Richard Hatteras and his friend managed to make their escape from custody in time to follow the scoundrels to Sydney, and to warn me of the plot that was hatching against me. The result was disastrous. Foiled in his endeavours to revenge himself upon me by marrying my daughter to an impostor, Nikola had the audacity to abduct my girl from a ball at Government House and to convey her on a yacht to an island in the South Pacific, whence a month later we rescued her. Whether we should have been permitted to do so if the stick referred to, which was demanded as ransom, had not fallen, quite by chance, into Nikola's possession, I cannot say. But the stick *did* become his property, and now we are free. Since then my daughter has married Sir Richard Hatteras, and at the present moment they are living on his estate in England. I expect you will be wondering why I have not prosecuted this man Nikola, but to tell you the honest truth, McAndrew, I have such a wholesome dread of him that since I have got my girl back, and have only lost the curio, which has always been a trouble to me, I am quite content to say no more about the matter. Besides, I must confess, he has worked with such devilish cunning that, trained in the law as I am, I cannot see that we should stand any chance of bringing him to book."

"Now, Bruce, that you have heard the letter, what do you think of Dr. Nikola?"

"It puts rather a different complexion on affairs, doesn't it?" I said. "But still, if Nikola will play fair by me, £10,000 is £10,000. I've been twenty years in this world trying to make money, and this is the sum total of my wealth."

As I spoke I took out of my pocket all the money I had in the world, which comprised half a dozen coins, amounting in English to a total of 6s. *lod*. I turned to the merchant.

"I don't know what you will think, but my own opinion is that Nikola's character will have to be a very outrageous one to outweigh 10,000 golden sovereigns."

"I am afraid you are a little bit reckless, aren't you, Bruce?" said the cautious McAndrew. "If you will take my advice I should say try for something else, and what is more, I'll help you to do so. There is a billet now open in my old friend Webster's office, the salary is a good one and the duties are light. When I saw him this morning it was still unfilled. Why not try for it? If you like I'll give you a letter of introduction to him, and will tell him at the same time that I shall consider it a personal favour if he will take you into his employ."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you," I answered warmly. "Yes, I think I will try for it before I give Nikola a reply. May I have the letter now?"

"With pleasure," he said. "I will write it at once."

Thereupon he dipped his pen in the ink and composed the epistle. When it was written and I had taken it, I thanked him warmly for his kindness, and bade him good-bye.

Mr. Webster's *hong* was at the far end of the Bund, and was another fine building. As soon as I had gained admittance I inquired for the merchant, and after a brief wait was conducted to his office. He proved to be Mr. McAndrew's opposite in every way. He was tall, portly, and intensely solemn. He seldom laughed, and when he did his mirth was hard and cheerless like his own exterior. He read my letter carefully, and then said--

"I am exceedingly sorry, Mr. Bruce, that you should have had all this trouble. I should have been only too glad for my friend McAndrew's sake to have taken you into my employ; unfortunately, however, the position in question was filled less than an hour ago."

"I regret to hear that," I said, with a little sigh of disappointment. "I really am most unfortunate; this makes the thirteenth post I have tried for, as you see, unsuccessfully, since I arrived in Shanghai."

"Your luck does not seem propitious," was the reply. "But if you would like to put your applications up to an even number I will place you in the way of another. I understand that the Red and Yellow Funnel Steamer Company have a vacancy in their office, and if you would care to come along with me at once I'll take you up and introduce you to the manager myself. In that case he will probably do all he can for you."

I thanked him for his courtesy, and when he had donned his *topee* we accordingly set off for the office in question. But another disappointment was in store for me. As in Mr. Webster's own case the vacant post had just been filled, and when we passed out of the manager's sanctum into the main office the newly-appointed clerk was already seated upon his high stool making entries in a ledger.

On leaving the building I bade my companion good-bye on the pavement, and then with a heavy heart returned to my abode. I had not been there ten minutes before my landlord entered the room, and without preface, and with the smallest modicum of civility, requested that I would make it convenient to discharge my account that very day. As I was quite unable to comply with his request, I was compelled to tell him so, and when he left the room there was a decidedly unpleasant coolness between us. For some considerable time after I was alone again. I sat wrapped in anxious thought. What was I to do? Every walk of life seemed closed against me; my very living was in jeopardy; and though, if I remained in Shanghai, I might hear of other billets, still I had no sort of guarantee that I should be any more successful in obtaining one of them than I had hitherto been. In the meantime I had to live, and what was more, to pay my bill. I could not go away and leave things to take care of themselves, for the reason that I had not the necessary capital for travelling, while if I remained and did not pay, I should find myself in the Mixed Court before many days were over.

Such being the desperate condition of my affairs, to accept Dr. Nikola's offer was the only thing open to me. But I was not going to do so without driving a bargain. If he would deposit, as he said, £5,000 to my credit in the bank I should not only be saved, but I should then have a substantial guarantee of his solvency. If not, well, I had better bring matters to a climax at once. Leaving the house I returned to the Bund, and seating myself in a shady spot carefully reviewed the whole matter. By the time darkness fell my mind was made up--*I would go to Nikola.*

Exactly at eight o'clock I reached his house and rang the bell. In answer to my peal the native boy, the same who had admitted me on the previous occasion, opened the door and informed me that his master was at home and expecting me. Having entered I was conducted to the apartment in which I had waited for him on the preceding evening. Again for nearly five minutes I was left to myself and my own thoughts, then the door opened and Dr. Nikola walked into the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Bruce," he said. "You are very punctual, and that is not only a pleasant trait in your character, but it is also a good omen, I hope. Shall we go into the next room? We can talk better there."

I followed him into the adjoining apartment, and at his invitation seated myself in the chair I had occupied on the previous night. We had not been there half a minute before the black cat made his appearance, and recognizing me as an old friend rubbed his head against my leg.

"You see even the cat is anxious to conciliate you," said Nikola, with a queer little smile. "I don't suppose there are five other men in the world with whom he would be as friendly as that on so short an acquaintance. Now let me hear your decision. Will you come with me, or have you resolved to decline my offer?"

"Under certain conditions I have made up my mind to accompany you," I said. "But I think it only fair to tell you that those conditions are rather stringent."

"Let me hear them," said Nikola, with that gracious affability he could sometimes assume. "Even if they are overpowering, I think it will go hard with me if I cannot effect some sort of a compromise with you."

"Well, to begin with," I answered, "I shall require you to pay into a bank here the sum of £5,000. If you will do that, and will give me a bill at a year for the rest of the money, I'm your man, and you may count upon my doing everything in my power to serve you."

"My dear fellow, is that all?" said Nikola quickly. "I will make it £10,000 with pleasure to secure your co-operation. I had no idea it would be the money that would stop you. Excuse me one moment."

He rose from his chair and went across to a table at the other end of the room. Having seated himself he wrote for two or three moments; then returning handed me a small slip of paper, which I discovered was a cheque for £10,000.

"There is your money," he said. "You can present it as soon as you like, and the bank will cash it on sight. I think that should satisfy you as to the genuineness of my motives. Now I suppose you are prepared to throw in your lot with me?"

"Wait one moment," I said. "That is not all. You have treated me very generously, and it is only fair that I should behave in a similar manner to you."

"Thank you," answered Nikola. "What is it you have to say to me now?"

"Do you know a man named Wetherell?"

"Perfectly," replied Nikola. "He was Colonial Secretary of New South Wales until about six months ago. I have very good reasons for knowing him. I had the honour of abducting his daughter in Sydney, and I imprisoned his son-in-law in Port Said. Of course I know him. You see I am also candid with you."

"Vastly. But pardon the expression, was it altogether a nice transaction?"

"It all depends upon what you consider a *nice* transaction," he said. "To you, for instance, who have your own notions of what is right and what is wrong, it might seem a little peculiar. I am in a different case, however. Whatever I do I consider right. What you might do, in nine cases out of ten, I should consider wrong. Whether I might have saved himself all trouble by selling me the stick which China Pete gave him, and about which he wrote to McAndrew, who read the letter to you this morning!"

"How do you know he did?"

"How do I know anything?" inquired Nikola, with an airy wave of his hand. "He *did* read it, and if you will look at me fixedly for a moment I will tell you the exact purport of the rest of your conversation."

"I don't know that it is necessary," I replied.

"Nor do I," said Nikola quietly, and then lit a cigarette. "Are you satisfied with my explanation?"

"Was it an explanation?" I asked.

Nikola only answered with a smile, and lifted the cat on to his knee. He stroked its fur with his long white fingers, at the same time looking at me from under his half-closed eyelids.

"Do you know, I like you," he said after a while. "There's something so confoundedly matter-of-fact about you. You give me the impression every time you begin to speak that you are going to say something out of the common."

"Thank you."

"I was going to add that the rest of your sentence invariably shatters that impression."

"You evidently have a very poor impression of my cleverness."

"Not at all. I am the one who has to say the smart things; you will have to do them. It is an equal distribution of labour."

Now, are we going together or are we not?"

"Yes, I will go with you," I answered.

"I am delighted," said Nikola, holding out his hand. "Let us shake hands on it."

We shook hands, and as we did so he looked me fairly in the face.

"Let me tell you once and for all," he said, "if you play fair by me I will stand by you, come what may; but if you shirk one atom of your responsibility--well, you will only have yourself to blame for what happens. That's a fair warning, isn't it?"

"Perfectly," I answered. "Now may I know something of the scheme itself, and when you propose to start?"



CHAPTER 19. The SCHEME

“By all means,” said Dr. Nikola, settling himself down comfortably in his chair and lighting a cigarette. “As you have thrown in your lot with me it is only right I *should* give you the information you seek. I need not ask you to keep what I tell you to yourself. Your own common-sense will commend that course to you. It is also just possible you may think I over-estimate the importance of my subject, but let me say this, if once it became known to certain folk in this town that I have obtained possession of that stick mentioned in Wetherell’s letter, my life, even in Shanghai, would not be worth five minutes’ purchase. Let me briefly review the circumstances of the case connected with this mysterious society. Remember I have gone into the matter most thoroughly. It is not the hobby of an hour, nor the amusement of an idle moment, but the object of research and the concentrated study of a lifetime. To obtain certain information of which I stood in need, I have tracked people all over the world. When I began my preparations for inducing Wetherell to relinquish possession of what I wanted, I had followed a man as far as Cuyaba, on the Bolivian frontier of Brazil. During the earlier part of his career this person had been a merchant buying gold-leaf in Western China, and in this capacity he chanced to hear a curious story connected with the doings of a certain sect, whose monastery is in the mountains on the way up to Thibet. It cost me six months’ continuous travel and nearly a thousand pounds in hard cash to find that man, and when I did his story did not exceed a dozen sentences; in other words, I paid him fully £10 per word for a bit of information that you would not, in all probability, have given him tenpence for. But I knew its value. I followed another man as far as Monte Video for the description of an obscure Chinese village; another to the Gold Coast for the name of a certain Buddhist priest, and a Russian Jew as far as Nijni Novgorod for a symbol he wore upon his watch-chain, and of the value of which he had not the slightest conception. The information I thus obtained personally I added to the store I had gathered by correspondence, and having accumulated it all I drafted a complete history of my researches up to that time. When that was done I think I may say without boasting that, with the exception of three men--who, by the way, are not at liberty to divulge anything, and who, I doubt very much, are even aware that a world exists at all beyond their own monastery walls--I know at least six times as much about the society in question as any man living. Now, having prefaced my remarks in this fashion, let me give you a complete summary of the case. As far as I can gather, in or about the year 288 b.c., in fact at the time that Devenipiatissa was planting the sacred Bo tree at Anuradhapura, in Ceylon, three priests, noted for their extreme piety, and for the extent of their scientific researches, migrated from what is now the island of Ceylon, across to the mainland of Asia. Having passed through the country at present called Burmah, and after innumerable vicissitudes and constant necessary changes of quarters, they brought up in the centre of the country we now call Thibet. Here two of the original trio died, while the remaining one and his new confreres built themselves a monastery, set to work to gather about them a number of peculiar devotees, and to continue their researches. Though the utmost secrecy was observed, within a few years the fame of their doings had spread itself abroad. That this was so we know, for we find constant mention made of them by numerous Chinese historians. One I will quote you.”

Dr. Nikola rose from his chair and crossed the room to an old cabinet standing against the further wall. From this he took a large book, looking suspiciously like a scrap-album, in which were pasted innumerable cuttings and manuscripts. He brought it across to his chair and sat down again. Then, having turned the leaves and found what he wanted, he prepared to read.

“It may interest you to know,” he said, looking up at me before he began, “that the paragraph I am about to read to you, which was translated from the original with the utmost care by myself, was written the same year and month that William the Conqueror landed in England. It runs as follows:--

“And of this vast sect, and of the peculiar powers with which they are invested, it is with some diffidence that I speak. It is affirmed by those credulous in such matters that their skill in healing is greater than that of all other living men, also that their power in witchcraft surpasses that of any others the world has known. It is said, moreover, that they possess the power of restoring the dead to life, and of prolonging beyond the ordinary span the days of man. But of these things I can only write to you as they have been told to me.”

Dr. Nikola turned to another page.

“After skipping five hundred years,” he said, “we find further mention made of them; this time the writer is Feng Lao

Lan, a well-known Chinese historian who flourished about the year 1500. He describes them as making themselves a source of trouble to the kingdom in general. From being a collection of a few simple monks, installed in a lonely monastery in the centre of Thibet, they have now become one of the largest secret societies in the East, though the mystic powers supposed to be held by them are still limited to the three headmen, or principal brothers. Towards the end of the sixteenth century it is certain that they exercised such a formidable influence in political affairs as to warrant the Government in issuing orders for their extermination. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that the all-powerful Triad Society, with its motto, 'Hoan Cheng Hok Beng,' which, as you know, exercised such an enormous influence in China until quite recently, was only an offshoot of the society which I am so eager to explore. That the sect *does* possess the scientific and occult knowledge that has been attributed to it for over two thousand years I feel convinced, and if there is any power which can assist me in penetrating their secrets I intend to employ it. In our own and other countries which we are accustomed to call 'civilized' it has long been the habit to ridicule any belief in what cannot be readily seen and understood by the least educated. To the average Englishman there is no occult world. But see what a contradictory creature he is when all is said and done. For if he be devout, he tells you that he firmly believes that when the body dies the soul goes to Heaven, which is equivalent to Olympus, Elysium, Arcadia, Garden of Hesperides, Valhalla, Walhalla, Paradise, or Nirvana, as the case may be. He has no notion, or rather, I think, he will not be able to give you any description, of what sort of place his Heaven is likely to be. He has all sorts of vague ideas about it, but though it is part of his religion to believe beyond question that there is such a place, it is all wrapped in shadow of more or less impenetrable depth. To sum it all up, he believes that, while, in his opinion, such a thing as--shall we say Theosophy?--is arrant nonsense, and unworthy of a thought, the vital essence of man has a second and greater being after death. In other words, to put my meaning a little more plainly, it is pretty certain that if you were to laugh at him, as he laughs at the Theosophist and Spiritualist, he would consider that he had very good grounds to consider his intelligence insulted. And yet he himself is simply a contradiction contradicted. You may wonder towards what all this rigmarole is leading. But if I were to describe to you the curious things I have myself seen in different parts of the East, and the extraordinary information I have collected first hand from others, I venture to think you would believe me either a wizard myself or an absurdly credulous person. I tell you, Bruce, I have witnessed things that would seem to upset every known law of nature. Though there was occasionally trickery in the performance I am convinced in the majority of cases the phenomena were genuine. And that brings us to another stumbling-block--the meaning of the expression, 'trickery.' What I should probably call 'trick' you would, in nine cases out of ten, consider blackest magic. But enough talking. Let me give you an illustration of my meaning."

As he spoke he went across to a sideboard and from it he took an ordinary glass tumbler and a carafe of water, which he placed upon the table at his elbow. Then seating himself again in his chair he filled the glass to overflowing. I watched him carefully, wondering what was coming next.

"Examine the glass for yourself," he said. "You observe that it is quite full of water. I want you to be very sure of that."

I examined the glass and discovered that it was so full that it would be impossible to move it without spilling some of its contents. Having done so I told him that I was convinced it was fully charged.

"Very well," he said; "in that case I will give you an example of what I might call 'Mind *versus* Matter.' That glass is quite full, as you have seen for yourself; now watch me."

From a tray by his side he took a match, lit a wax candle, and when the flame had burnt up well, held it above the water so that one drop of wax might fall into the liquid.

"Now," he said, "I want you to watch that wax intently from where you are while I count twenty."

I did as he ordered me, keeping my eyes firmly fixed upon the little globule floating on the surface of the water. Then as I looked, slowly, and to the accompaniment of Nikola's monotonous counting, the water sank lower and lower, until the tumbler was completely empty.

"Get up and look for yourself, but don't touch the glass," said my host. "Be perfectly sure, however, that it is empty, for I shall require your affidavit upon that point directly."

I examined the glass most carefully, and stated that, to the best of my belief, there was not a drop of water in it.

"Very well," said Nikola. "Now be so good as to sit down and watch it once more."

This time he counted backwards, and as he did so the water rose again in the glass until it was full to overflowing, and still the wax was floating on the surface.

For a moment we were both silent. Then Nikola poured the water back into the jug, and having done so handed the glass to me.

"Examine it carefully," he said, "or you may imagine it has been made by a London conjuring firm on purpose for the trick. Convince yourself of this, and when you have made sure give me your explanation of the mystery."

I examined the glass with the most searching scrutiny, but no sign of any preparation or mechanism could I discover.

"I cannot understand it at all," I said; "and I'm sure I can give you no explanation."

"And yet you are not thoroughly convinced in your mind that I have not performed a clever conjuring trick, such as you might see at Maskelyne and Devant's. Let me give you two more examples before I finish. Look me intently in the face until that clock on the mantelpiece, which is now standing at twenty-eight minutes past nine, shall strike the half-hour."

I did as I was ordered, and anything like the concentrated intensity of his gaze I never remember to have experienced before. I have often heard men say that when persons gifted with the mesmeric power have looked at them (some women have this power too) they have felt as if they had no backs to their heads. In this case I can only say that I not only felt as if I had no back to my head, but as if I had no head at all.

The two minutes seemed like two hours, then the clock struck, and Nikola said:

"Pull up your left shirt cuff, and examine your arm."

I did as he ordered me, and there in red spots I saw an exact reproduction of my own signature. As I looked at it it faded away again, until, in about half a minute from my first seeing it, it was quite gone.

"That is what I call a trick; in other words, it is neither more nor less than hypnotism. But you will wonder why I have put myself to so much trouble. In the first place the water did not go out of the glass, as you supposed, but remained exactly as when you first saw it. I simply willed that you should imagine it did go, and your imagination complied with the demand made upon it. In the last experiment you had a second proof of the first subject. Of course both are very easily explained, even by one who has dabbled in the occult as little as yourself. But though you call it hypnotism in this airy fashion, can you give me an explanation of what you mean by that ambiguous term?"

"Simply that your mind," I answered, "is stronger than mine, and for this reason is able to dominate it."

"That is the popular theory, I grant you," he answered; "but it is hardly a correct one, I fancy. Even if it were stronger, how could it be possible for me to transmit thoughts which are in my brain to yours?"

"That I cannot attempt in any way to explain," I answered. "But isn't it classified under the general head of thought transference?"

"Precisely--I am prepared to admit so much; but your description, hypnotism, though as involved, is quite as correct a term. But let me tell you that both these illustrations were given to lead up to another, which will bring us nearer than we have yet come to the conclusion I am endeavouring to arrive at. Try and give me your complete attention again; above all, watch my finger."

As he spoke he began to wave his first finger in the air. It moved this way and that, describing figures of eight, and I followed each movement so carefully with my eyes that presently a small blue flame seemed to flicker at the end of it. Then, after perhaps a minute, I saw, or thought I saw, what might have been a tiny cloud settling in the further corner of the room. It was near the floor when I first noticed it, then it rose to about the height of a yard, and came slowly across the apartment towards me. Little by little it increased in size. Then it assumed definite proportions, became taller, until I thought I detected the outline of a human figure. This resemblance rapidly increased, until I could definitely distinguish the head and body of a man. He was tall and well-proportioned; his head was thrown back, and his eyes met mine with an eager, though somewhat strained, glance. Every detail was perfect, even to a ring upon his little finger; indeed, if I had met the man in the street next day I am certain I should have known him again. A strange orange-coloured light almost enveloped him, but in less than a minute he had become merged in the cloud once more; this gradually fell back into the corner, grew smaller and smaller, and finally disappeared altogether. I gave a little shiver, as if I were waking from some unpleasant dream, and turned to Nikola, who was watching me with half-closed eyes.

After I had quite recovered my wits, he took an album from the table and handed it to me.

"See if you can find in that book," he said, "the photograph of the man whose image you have just seen."

I unfastened the clasp, and turned the pages eagerly. Near the middle I discovered an exact reproduction of the vision

I had seen. The figure and face, the very attitude and expression, were the same in every particular, and even the ring I had noticed was upon the little finger. I was completely nonplussed.

"What do you think of my experiment?" asked Nikola.

"It was most wonderful and most mysterious," I said.

"But how do you account for it?" he asked.

"I can't account for it at all," I answered. "I can only suppose, since you owned to it before, that it must also have been hypnotism."

"Exactly," said Nikola. "But you will see in this case that, without any disc or passes, I not only produced the wish that you should see what I was thinking of, but also the exact expression worn by the person in the photograph. The test was successful in every way. And yet, how did I transfer the image that was in my mind to the retina of your eyes? You were positively certain you saw the water decrease in the glass just now; you would have pledged your word of honour that you saw your name printed upon your arm; and under other circumstances you would, in all probability, have ridiculed any assertion on my part that you did not see the vision of the man whose photograph is in that book. Very good. That much decided, do you feel equal to doubting that, though not present in the room, I could wake you in the night, and make you see the image of some friend, whom you knew to be long dead, standing by your bedside. Shall I make myself float in mid-air? Shall I transport you out of this room, and take you to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean? Shall I lift you up into heaven, or conduct you to the uttermost parts of hell? You have only to say what you desire to see and I will show it to you as surely and as perfectly as you saw those other things. But remember, all I have done is only what I call trickery, for it was done by hypnotism, which is to my mind, though you think it so mysterious, neither more nor less than making people believe what you will by the peculiar power of your own mind. But answer me this: If hypnotism is only the very smallest beginning of the knowledge possessed by the sect I am trying to discover, what must their greatest secret be? Believe me when I tell you that what I have shown you this evening is as a molehill to a mountain compared with what you will learn if we can only penetrate into that place of which I have told you. I pledge you my word on it. Now answer me this question: Is it worth trying for, or not?"

"It is worth it," I cried enthusiastically. "I will go with you, and I will give you my best service; if you will play fair by me, I will do the same by you. But there is one further question I must ask you: Has that stick you obtained from Mr. Wetherell anything at all to do with the work in hand?"

"More than anything," he answered. "It is the key to everything. Originally, you must understand, there were only three of these sticks in existence. One belongs, or rather *did* belong, to each of the three heads of the sect. In pursuit of some particular information one of the trio left the monastery, and came out into the world. He died in a mysterious manner, and the stick fell into the possession of the abbot of the Yung Ho Kung, in Peking, from whom it was stolen by an Englishman in my employ, known as China Pete, who risked his life, disguised as a Thibetan monk, to get it. Having stolen it, he eluded me, and fled to Australia, not knowing the real value of his treasure. The society became cognizant of its loss, and sent men after him. In attempting to obtain possession of it one of the Chinamen was killed off the coast of Queensland, and China Pete was arrested in Sydney on a charge of having murdered him. Wetherell defended him, and got him off; and, not being able to pay for his services, the latter made him a present of the stick. A month later I reached Sydney in search of it, but the Chinese were there before me. We both tried to obtain possession of it, but, owing to Wetherell's obstinacy, neither of us was successful. I offered Wetherell his own price for it; he refused to give it up. I pleaded with him, argued, entreated, but in vain. Then I set myself to get it from him at any hazard. How I succeeded you know. All that occurred six months ago. As soon as it was in my possession I returned here with the intention of penetrating into the interior, and endeavouring to find out what I so much wanted to know."

"And where is the stick now?" I asked.

"In my own keeping," he answered. "If you would care to see it, I shall have very much pleasure in showing it to you."

"I should like to see it immensely," I answered.

With that he left the room, to return in about five minutes. Then, seating himself before me, he took from his pocket a small case, out of which he drew a tiny stick, at most not more than three inches long. It was a commonplace little affair, a deep black in colour, and covered with Chinese hieroglyphics in dead gold. A piece of frayed gold ribbon, much tarnished, and showing evident signs of having passed through many hands, was attached to it at one end.

He handed it to me, and I examined it carefully.

"But if this stick were originally stolen," I said, "you will surely not be so imprudent as to place yourself in the power of the society with it in your possession? It would mean certain death."

"If it were all plain sailing, and there were no risk to be run, I doubt very much if I should pay you £10,000 for the benefit of your company," he answered. "It is because there is a great risk, and because I must have assistance, though I am extremely doubtful whether we shall ever come out of it alive, that I am taking you with me. I intend to discover their secret if possible, and I also intend that this stick, which undoubtedly is the key of the outer gate, so to speak, shall help me in my endeavours. If you are afraid to accompany me, having heard all, I will allow you to forego your promise and turn back while there is time."

"I have not the slightest intention of turning back," I answered. "I don't know that I am a braver man than most, but if you are willing to go on I am ready to accompany you."

"And so you shall, and there's my hand on it," he cried, giving me his hand as he spoke.

"Now tell me what you intend to do," I said. "How do you mean to begin?"

"Well, in the first place," said Nikola, "I shall wait here until the arrival of a certain man from Peking. He is one of the lay brethren of the society who has fallen under my influence, and as soon as he puts in an appearance and I have got his information we shall disguise ourselves, myself as an official of one of the coast provinces, you as my secretary, and together we shall set out for the capital. Arriving there we will penetrate the Llama-serai, the most anti-European monastery in all China, and, by some means or another, extract from the chief priest sufficient information to take the next step upon our journey. After that we shall proceed as circumstances dictate."

"And when do you intend that we shall start?"

"As soon as the man arrives, perhaps to-night, probably to-morrow morning."

"And as to our disguises?"

"I have in my possession everything we can possibly need."

"In that case I suppose there is nothing to be done until the messenger arrives?"

"Nothing, I think."

"Then if you will allow me I will wish you good-bye and be off to bed. In case I do not hear from you tonight, at what hour would you like me to call tomorrow?"

"I will let you know before breakfast-time without fail. You are not afraid, are you?"

"Not in the least," I answered.

"And you'll say nothing to anybody, even under compulsion, as to our mission?"

"I have given you my promise," I answered, and rose from my seat.

Once more I followed him down the main passage of the bungalow into the front verandah. Arriving there we shook hands and I went down the steps into the street.

As I turned the corner and made my way in the direction of the road leading to the English Concession, I saw a man, without doubt a Chinaman, rise from a corner and follow me. For nearly a quarter of a mile he remained about a hundred yards behind me, then he was joined by a second, who presently left his companion at a cross street and continued the march. Whether their espionage was only accidental, or whether I was really the object of their attention, I was for some time at a loss to conjecture, but when I saw the second give place to a third, and the third begin to decrease the distance that separated us, I must own I was not altogether comfortable in my mind. Arriving at a more crowded thoroughfare I hastened my steps, and having proceeded about fifty yards along it, dodged down a side lane. This lane conveyed me into another, which eventually brought me out within half a dozen paces of the house I wanted.

That the occupants of the dwelling had not yet retired to bed was evident from the lights I could see moving about inside. In response to my knock some one left the room upon the right hand of the passage and came towards the door where I waited. When he had opened it I discovered that it was Mr. McAndrew himself.

"Why, Bruce!" he cried in surprise, as soon as he discovered who his visitor was. "You've chosen a pretty late hour for calling; but never mind, come along in; I am glad to see you." As he spoke he led me into the room from which he had just emerged. It was his dining-room, and was furnished in a ponderous, but luxurious, fashion. In a chair beside the long

table--for Mr. McAndrew has a large family, and twelve sat down to the morning and evening meal--was seated a tiny grey-haired lady, his wife, while opposite her, engaged upon some fancy work, was a pretty girl of sixteen, his youngest daughter and pet, as I remembered. That the lateness of my visit also occasioned them some surprise I could see by their faces; but after a few commonplace remarks they bade me good-night and went out of the room, leaving me alone with the head of the house.

"I suppose you have some very good reason for this visit, or you wouldn't be here," the latter said, as he handed me a box of cigars. "Have you heard of a new billet, or has your innocent friend Nikola commenced to blackmail you?"

"Neither of these things has happened," I answered with a laugh.

"But as I am in all probability leaving Shanghai to-morrow morning before banking hours, I have come to see if I may so far tax your kindness as to ask you to take charge of a cheque for me." I thereupon produced Nikola's draft and handed it to him. He took it, glanced at it, looked up at me, returned his eyes to it once more, and then whistled.

"This looks like business," he said.

"Doesn't it," I answered. "I can hardly believe that I am worth £10,000."

"You are to be congratulated. And now what do you want me to do with it?" inquired McAndrew, turning the paper over and over in his hand as if it were some uncanny talisman which might suddenly catch him up and convert him into a camel or an octopus before he could look round.

"I want you to keep it for me if you will," I answered "To put it on deposit in your bank if you have no objection. I am going away, certainly for six months, possibly for a year, and when I return to Shanghai I will come and claim it. That's if I *do* return."

"And if not?"

"In that case I will leave it all to you. In the meantime I want you to advance me £20 if you will; you can repay yourself out of the amount. Do you mind doing it?"

"Not in the very least," he answered; "but we had better have it all in writing, so that there may be no mistake."

He thereupon produced from a drawer in a side table a sheet of notepaper. Having written a few lines on it he gave it to me to sign, at the same time calling in one of his sons to witness my signature. This formality completed he handed me £20 in notes and English gold, and our business was concluded. I rose to go.

"Bruce," said the old gentleman in his usual kindly fashion, putting his hand upon my shoulder as he spoke, "I don't know what you are up to, and I don't suppose it will do for me to inquire, but I am aware that you have been in pretty straitened circumstances lately, and I am afraid you are embarking on some foolishness or other now. For Heaven's sake weigh carefully the pros and cons before you commit yourself. Remember always that one moment's folly may wreck your whole after-life."

"You need have no fear on that score," I answered. "I am going into this business with my eyes open. All the same I am obliged to you for your warning and for what you have done for me. Good-night and good-bye."

I shook hands with him, and then passing into the verandah left the bungalow.

I was not fifty yards from the gate when a noise behind me induced me to look round. A man had been sitting in the shadow on the other side of the road. He had risen now and was beginning to follow me. That it was the same individual who had accompanied me to McAndrew's house I had not the slightest doubt. I turned to my right hand down a side street in order to see if he would pursue me; he also turned. I doubled again; he did the same. I proceeded across a piece of open ground instead of keeping on in the straight line I had hitherto been following; he imitated my example. This espionage was growing alarming, so I quickened my pace, and having found a side street with a high fence on one side, followed the palisading along till I came to the gate. Through this I dashed, and as soon as I was in, stooped down in the shadow. Half a minute later I heard the man coming along on the other side. When he could no longer see me ahead of him he came to a halt within half a dozen paces of where I crouched. Then having made up his mind that I must have crossed the road and gone down a dark lane opposite, he too crossed, and in a few seconds was out of sight.

As soon as I had convinced myself that I had got rid of him I passed out into the street again and made my way as quickly as possible back to my abode.

But I was not to lose my mysterious pursuer after all, for just as I was entering my own compound he put in an

appearance. Seeing that I had the advantage I ran up the steps of the verandah and went inside. From a window I watched him come up the street and stand looking about him. Then he returned by the way he had come, and, for the time being, that was the last I saw of him. In less than a quarter of an hour I was in bed and asleep, dreaming of Nikola, and imagining that I was being turned into an elephant by his uncanny powers.

How long I remained snoozing I cannot say, but I was suddenly awakened by the feeling that somebody was in my room. Nor was I mistaken. A man was sitting by my bedside, and in the dim moonlight I could see that he was a Chinaman.

"What are you doing here?" I cried, sitting up in bed.

"Be silent!" my visitor whispered in Chinese. "If you speak it will cost you your life."

Without another word I thrust my hand under the pillow intending to produce the revolver I had placed there when I went to bed. But it was gone. Whether my visitor had stolen it or I had imagined that I had put it there and forgotten to do so, it was beyond my powers to tell. At any rate the weapon, upon which it would seem my life depended, was gone.

"What is your business with me?" I asked, resolved to bring my visitor to his bearings without loss of time.

"Not so loud," he answered. "I am sent by Dr. Nikola to request your honourable presence. He desires that you will come to him without a moment's delay."

"But I've only just left him," I said. "Why does he send for me again?"

"I cannot say, but it is possible that something important has occurred," was the man's answer. "He bade me tell you to come at once."

With that I got up and dressed myself as quickly as possible. It was evident that the expected messenger from Peking had arrived, and in that case we should probably be setting off for the capital before morning. At any rate I did not waste a moment, and as soon as I was ready went out into the verandah, where the man who had come to fetch me was sitting. He led me across the compound into the street and pointed to a chair which with its bearers was in waiting for me.

"Your friend is in a hurry," said the man who had called me, by way of explanation, "and he bade me not lose a moment."

"In that case you may go along as hard as you like," I answered; "I am quite ready."

I took my place in the chair, which was immediately lifted by the bearers, and within a minute of my leaving the house we were proceeding down the street at a comparatively fast pace. At that hour the town was very quiet; indeed, with the exception of an occasional Sikh policeman and a belated 'rickshaw coolie or two, we met no one. At the end of a quarter of an hour it was evident that we had arrived at our destination, for the chair came to a standstill and the bearers set me down. I sprang out and looked about me. To my surprise, however, it was not the house I expected to see that I found before me. We had pulled up at the entrance to a much larger bungalow, standing in a compound of fair size. While I waited my messenger went into the house, to presently return with the information that, if I would be pleased to follow him, Dr. Nikola would see me at once.

The house was in total darkness and as silent as the grave. I passed into the main hall, and was about to proceed down it towards a door at the further end, when I was, without warning, caught by the back of the neck, a gag of some sort was placed in my mouth, and my hands were securely fastened behind me. Next moment I was lifted into the air and borne into a room whence a bright light suddenly streamed forth. Here three Chinamen were seated, clad in heavy figured silk, and wearing enormous tortoiseshell spectacles upon their noses. They received me with a grunt of welcome, and bade my captors remove the gag from my mouth. This done the elder of the trio said quietly--but it seemed to me somewhat inconsequently:

"We hope that your honourable self is enjoying good health?"

I answered, with as much calmness as I could possibly assume at so short a notice, that, "For such an utterly insignificant personage I was *in* the enjoyment of the best of health." Whereupon I was requested to say how it came about that I was now in China, and what my business there might be. When I had answered this the man on the right leant a little forward and said:

"You are not telling us the honourable truth. What business have you with Dr. Nikola?"

I summoned all my wits to my assistance.

"Who is Dr. Nikola?" I asked.

"The person whom you have visited two nights in succession," said the man who had first spoken. "Tell us what mischief you and he are hatching together."

Seeing that it would be useless attempting to deny my association with Nikola I insinuated that we were interested in the purchase of Chinese silk together, but this assertion was received with a scornful grunt of disapproval.

"We must have the truth," said the man in the biggest spectacles.

"I can tell you no more," I answered.

"In that case we have no option," he said, "but to extract the information by other means."

With that he made a sign to one of the attendants, who immediately left the room, to return a few moments later with a roll of chain, and some oddly-shaped wooden bars. A heavy sweat rose upon my forehead. I had seen a good deal of Chinese torture in my time, and now it looked as if I were about to have a taste of it.

"What do you know of Dr. Nikola?" repeated the man who had first spoken, and who was evidently the principal of the trio.

"I have already told you," I repeated, this time with unusual emphasis.

Again he asked the same question without change of tone.

But I only repeated my previous answer.

"For the last time, what do you know of Dr. Nikola?"

"I have told you," I answered, my heart sinking like lead. Thereupon he raised his hand a little and made a sign to the men near the door. Instantly I was caught and thrown on my back upon the floor. Before I could expostulate or struggle a curious wooden collar was clasped round my neck, and a screw was turned in it until another revolution would have choked me. Once more I heard the old man say monotonously.

"What do you know of Dr. Nikola?"

I tried to repeat my former assertion, but owing to the tightness of the collar I found a difficulty in speaking. Then the man in the centre rose and came over to where I lay; instantly the collar was relaxed, my arms were released, and a voice said:

"Get up, Mr. Bruce. You need have no further fear; we shall not hurt you."

It was Dr. Nikola!



CHAPTER 20. WE SET OUT FOR TIENTSIN

I could scarcely believe the evidence of my senses. Nikola's disguise was so perfect that it would have required almost superhuman cleverness to penetrate it. In every particular he was a true Celestial. His accent was without a flaw, his deportment exactly what that of a Chinaman of high rank would be, while his general demeanour and manner of sustaining his assumed character could not have been found fault with by the most fastidious critic. I felt that if he could so easily hoodwink me there could be little doubt that he would pass muster under less exacting scrutiny. So as soon as I was released I sprang to my feet and warmly congratulated him, not a little relieved, you may be sure, to find that I was with friends, and was not to be tortured, as I had at first supposed.

"You must forgive the rough treatment to which you have been subjected," said Nikola. "But I wanted to test you very thoroughly. Now what do you think of my disguise?"

"It is perfect," I answered. "Considering your decided personality, I had no idea it could possibly be so good. But where are we?"

"In a bungalow I have taken for the time being," he replied. "And now let us get to business. The man whom you saw on my right was Laohwan, the messenger whom I told you I expected from Peking. He arrived half an hour after you had left me this evening, gave me the information I wanted, and now I am ready to start as soon as you are."

"Let me go home and put one or two things together," I answered, "and then I'm your man."

"Certainly," said Nikola. "One of my servants shall accompany you to carry your bag, and to bring you back here as soon as your work is completed."

With that I set off for my abode, followed by one of Nikola's boys. When we reached it I left him to wait for me outside, and let myself into my bedroom by the window. Having lit a candle, I hastened to put together the few little odds and ends I wished to take with me on my journey. This finished I locked my trunks, wrote a letter to my landlord, enclosing the amount I owed him, and then another to Barkston, asking him to be good enough to send for, and take charge of my trunks until I returned from a trip into the interior. This done I passed out of the house again, joined the boy who was waiting for me at the gate, and returned to the bungalow in which I had been so surprised by Nikola an hour or so before. It was long after midnight by the time I reached it, but I had no thought of fatigue. The excitement of our departure prevented my thinking of aught else. We were plunging into an unknown life bristling with dangers, and though I did not share Nikola's belief as to the result we should achieve, I had the certain knowledge that I should be well repaid for the risk I ran.

When I entered the house I found my employer awaiting my coming in the room where I had been hoaxed that evening. He was still in Chinese dress, and once again as I looked at him I felt it difficult to believe that this portly, sedate-looking Chinaman could be the slim European known to the world as Dr. Nikola.

"You have not been long, Mr. Bruce," he said, "and I am glad of it. Now if you will accompany me to the next room I will introduce you to your things. I have purchased for you everything that you can possibly require, and as I am well acquainted with your power of disguise, I have no fear at all as to the result."

On reaching the adjoining room I divested myself of my European habiliments, and set to work to don those which were spread out for my inspection. Then with some mixture from a bottle which I found upon the table, I stained my face, neck, and arms, after which my pigtail, which was made on a cleverly contrived scalp wig, was attached, and a large pair of tortoiseshell glasses of a similar pattern to those worn by Nikola, were placed upon my nose. My feet were encased in sandals, a stiff round hat of the ordinary Chinese pattern was placed upon my head, and this, taken with my thickly-padded robe of yellow silk, gave me a most dignified appearance.

When Nikola returned to the room he examined me carefully, and expressed himself as highly pleased with the result; indeed, when we greeted each other in the Chinese fashion and language he would have been a sharp man who could have detected that we were not what we pretended to be.

"Now," said Nikola, "if you are ready we will test the efficiency of our disguises. In half an hour's time there is a meeting at the house of a man named Lo Ting. The folk we shall meet there are members of a secret society aiming at the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty. Laohwan has gone on ahead, and, being a member of the society, will report to them the

arrival of two distinguished merchants from the interior, who are also members. I have got the passwords, and I know the general idea of their aims, so, with your permission, we will set off at once. When we get there I will explain my intentions more fully."

"But you are surely not going to attend a meeting of a secret society to-night?" I said, astonished at the coolness with which he proposed to run such a risk. "Wouldn't it be wiser to wait until we are a little more accustomed to our dresses?"

"By no means," answered Nikola. "I consider this will be a very good test. If we are detected by the folk we shall see to-night we shall know where the fault lies, and we can remedy it before it is too late. Besides, there is to be a man present who knows something of the inner working of the society, and from him I hope to derive some important information to help us on our way. Come along."

He passed into the passage and led the way through the house out into the compound, where we found a couple of chairs, with their attendant coolies, awaiting us. We stepped into them, and were presently being borne in a sedate fashion down the street.

In something under twenty minutes our bearers stopped and set us down again; we alighted, and after the coolies had disappeared Nikola whispered that the password was "Liberty," and that as one said it it was necessary to place the fingers of the right hand in the palm of the left. If I should be asked any questions I was to trust to my mother wit to answer them satisfactorily.

We approached the door, which was at the end of a small alley, and when we reached it I noticed that Nikola rapped upon it twice with a large ring he wore upon the first finger of his right hand. In answer a small and peculiar sort of grille was opened, and a voice within said in Chinese:

"Who is it that disturbs honest people at this unseemly hour?"

"Two merchants from Szechuen who have come to Shanghai in search of liberty," said my companion, holding up his hands in the manner described above.

Immediately the door was opened and I followed Nikola into the house. The passage was in darkness and terribly close. As soon as we had entered, the front gate was shut behind us, and we were told to walk straight forward. A moment later another door at the further end opened, and a bright light streamed forth. Our conductor signed to us to enter, and assuming an air of humility, and folding our hands in the prescribed fashion before us, we passed into a large apartment in which were seated possibly twenty men. Without addressing a word to one of them we crossed and took up our positions on a sort of divan at the further end. Pipes were handed to us, and for what must have been nearly five minutes we continued solemnly to puff out smoke, without a word being uttered in the room. If I were to say that I felt at my ease during this long silence it would hardly be the truth; but I flatter myself that, whatever my feelings may have been, I did not permit a sign of my embarrassment to escape me. Then an elderly Chinaman, who sat a little to our right, and who was, without doubt, the chief person present, turned to Nikola and questioned him as to his visit to Shanghai. Nikola answered slowly and gravely, after the Celestial fashion, deprecating any idea of personal advantage, and asserting that it was only to have the honour of saying he had been in Shanghai that he had come at all. When he had finished, the same question was addressed to me. I answered in similar terms, and then another silence fell upon us all. Indeed, it was not until we had been in the room nearly half an hour that any attempt at business was made. Then such a flow of gabble ensued that I could scarcely make head or tail of what I heard. Nikola was to the fore throughout. He invented plots for the overthrowing of dynasties, each of which had a peculiar merit of its own; he theoretically assassinated at least a dozen persons in high places, and, what was more, disposed of their bodies afterwards. To my thinking he out-heroded Herod in his zeal. One thing, however, was quite certain, before he had been an hour in the place he was at the head of affairs, and, had he so desired, could have obtained just what he wanted from those present. I did my best to second his efforts, but my co-operation was quite unnecessary. Three o'clock had passed before the meeting broke up. Then one by one the members left the room, until only Laohwan, the old man who had first addressed us, Nikola and myself remained in occupation.

Then little by little, with infinite tact, Nikola led the conversation round into the channel he wanted. How he had learnt that the old man knew anything at all of the matter was more than I could understand. But that he did know something, and that, with a little persuasion, he might be induced to give us the benefit of his knowledge, soon became evident.

"But these things are not for every one," he said, after a brief recital of the tales he had heard. "If my honourable friend

will be guided by one who has had experience, he will not seek to penetrate further."

"The sea of knowledge is for all who desire to swim in it," answered Nikola, puffing solemnly at his pipe. "I have heard these things before, and I would convince myself of their truth. Can you help me to such inquiries? I ask in the name of the Light of Heaven."

As he spoke he took from a pocket under his upper coat the small stick he had obtained from Wetherell. The old man no sooner saw it than his whole demeanour changed; he knelt humbly at Nikola's feet and implored his pardon.

"If my lord had spoken before," he said tremblingly, "I would have answered truthfully. All that I have is my lord's, and I will withhold nothing from him."

"I want nothing," said Nikola, "save what has been arranged. That I must have at once."

"My lord shall be obeyed," said the old man.

"It is well," Nikola answered. "Let there be no delay, and permit no word to pass your lips. Send it to this address, so that I may receive it at once."

He handed the other a card and then rose to go; five minutes later we were back in our respective chairs being borne down the street again. When we reached the house from which we had started Nikola called me into the room where I had dressed.

"You have had an opportunity now of seeing the power of that stick," he said. "It was Laohwan who discovered that the man was a member of the society. All that talk of overthrowing the Manchu dynasty was simply balderdash, partly real, but in a greater measure meant to deceive. Now if all goes well the old fellow will open the first gate to us, and then we shall be able to go ahead. Let us change our clothes and get back to my own house. If I mistake not we shall have to be off up the coast before breakfast-time."

With that we set to work, and as soon as we were dressed in European habiliments, left the house and returned to the bungalow where I had first called upon Nikola. By this time day was breaking, and already a stir of life was discernible in the streets. Making our way into the house we proceeded direct to Nikola's study, where his servants had prepared a meal for us. We sat down to it, and were in the act of falling to work upon a cold pie, when a boy entered with the announcement that a Chinaman was in the hall and desired to speak with us. It was Laohwan.

"Well," said Nikola, "what message does the old man send?"

In reply Loahwan, who I soon found was not prodigal of speech, took from his sleeve a slip of paper on which were some words written in Chinese characters. Nikola glanced at them, and when he had mastered their purport handed it across the table to me. The message was as follows:

"In the house of Quong Sha, in the Street of a Hundred Tribulations, Tientsin."

That was all.

Nikola turned to Laohwan.

"At what time does the North China boat sail?" he asked.

"At half-past six," answered Laohwan promptly.

Nikola looked at his watch, thought for a moment, and then said:

"Go on ahead. Book your passage and get aboard as soon as you can; we will join her later. But remember: until we get to Tientsin you must act as if you have never set eyes on either of us before."

Laohwan bowed and left the room.

"At this point," said Nikola, pouring himself out a cup of black coffee, "the real adventure commences. It is a quarter to five now; we will take it easy for half an hour and then set off to the harbour and get aboard."

Accordingly, as soon as we had finished our meal, we seated ourselves in lounge chairs and lit cigars. For half an hour we discussed the events of the evening, speculated as to the future, and, exactly as the clock struck a quarter-past five, rose to our feet again. Nikola rang a bell and his principal boy entered.

"I am going away," said Nikola. "I don't know when I shall be back. It may be a week, it may be a year. In the meantime you will take care of this house; you will not let one thing be stolen; and if when I come back I find a window broken or as much as a pin missing I'll saddle you with ten million devils. Mr. McAndrew will pay your wages and look after you. If you want anything go to him. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

"That will do," said Nikola. "You can go."

As the servant left the room my curious friend gave a strange whistle. Next moment the black cat came trotting in, sprang on her master's knee and crawled up onto his shoulder. Nikola looked at me and smiled.

"He will not forget me if I am away five years," he said. "What wife would be so constant?"

I laughed; the idea of Nikola and matrimony somehow did not harmonize very well. He lifted the cat down and placed him on the table.

"Apollyon," said he, with the only touch of regret I saw him show throughout the trip, "we have to part for a year. Good-bye, old cat, good-bye."

Then having stroked the animal gently once or twice he turned briskly to me.

"Come along," he said; "let us be off. Time presses."

The cat sat on the table watching him and appearing to understand every word he uttered. Nikola stroked its fur for the last time, and then walked out of the room. I followed at his heels and together we passed into the compound. By this time the streets were crowded. A new day had begun in Shanghai, and we had no difficulty in obtaining 'rickshaws.

"The *Vectis Queen*," said Nikola, as soon as we were seated. The coolies immediately started off at a run, and in something under a quarter of an hour we had reached the wharf side of the Hwang-Pu River. The boat we were in search of lay well out in the stream, and for this reason it was necessary that we should charter a sampan to reach her.

Arriving on board we interviewed the purser, and, after we had paid our fares, were conducted to our cabins. The *Vectis Queen*, as all the East knows, is not a large steamer, and her accommodation is, well, to say the least of it, limited. But at this particular time of year there were not a great many people travelling, consequently we were not overcrowded. As soon as I had arranged my baggage, I left my cabin and went on deck. Small is the world! Hardly had I stepped out of the companion-ladder before I was accosted by a man with whom I had been well acquainted on the Australian coastal service, but whom I thought at the other end of the earth.

"Why, Wilfred Bruce!" he cried. "Who'd have thought of seeing you here!"

"Jim Downing!" I cried, not best pleased, as you may suppose, at seeing him. "How long have you been in China?"

"Getting on for a year," he answered, "I came up with one of our boats, had a row with the skipper, and left her in Hong-Kong. After that I joined this line. But though I don't think much of the Chinkies, I am fairly well satisfied. You're looking pretty well, old man; but it seems to me you've got precious sunburnt since I saw you last."

"It's the effect of too much rice," I said with a smile.

He laughed with the spontaneous gaiety of a man who is ready to be amused by anything, however simple, and then we walked up the deck together. As we turned to retrace our steps, Nikola emerged from the companion-hatch and joined us. I introduced Downing to him, and in five minutes you would have supposed them friends of years' standing. Before they had been together a quarter of an hour Nikola had given him a prescription for prickly-heat, from which irritation Downing suffered considerably, and as soon as this proved successful, the young man's gratitude and admiration were boundless. By breakfast-time we were well down the river, and by midday Shanghai lay far behind us.

Throughout the voyage Nikola was in his best spirits; he joined in all the amusements, organized innumerable sports and games, and was indefatigable in his exertions to amuse. And while I am on this subject, let me say that there was one thing which struck me as being even more remarkable than anything else in the character of this extraordinary man, and that was his extreme fondness for children. There was one little boy in particular on board, a wee toddler scarcely four years old, with whom Nikola soon established himself on terms of intimacy; he would play with him for hours at a stretch, never tiring, and never for one moment allowing his attention to wander from the matter in hand. I must own that when I saw them amusing themselves together under the lee of one of the boats on the promenade deck, on the hatchways, or beneath the awning aft, I could scarcely believe my eyes. I had to ask myself if this man, whose entire interest seemed to be centred on paper boats, and pigs cut out of orange peel, could be the same Nikola from whom Wetherell, ex-Colonial Secretary of New South Wales, had fled in London as from a pestilence, and at the sight of whom Benwell, of the Chinese Revenue Service, had excused himself, and rushed out of the club in Shanghai. That, however, was just Nikola's character. If he were making a paper boat, cutting a pig out of orange peel, weaving a plot round a politician, or endeavouring to steal

the secret of an all-powerful society, he would give the matter in hand his whole attention, make himself master of every detail, and never leave it till he had achieved his object, or had satisfied himself that it was useless for him to work at it any longer. In the latter case he would drop it without a second thought.

Throughout the voyage Laohwan, though we saw him repeatedly, did not for a moment allow it to be supposed that he knew us. He was located on the forward deck, and, as far as we could gather, spent his whole time playing *fan-tan* with half-a-dozen compatriots on the cover of the forehatch.

The voyage up the coast was not an exciting one, but at last, at sunset one evening, we reached Tientsin, which, as all the world knows, is a treaty port located at the confluence of the Yu-Ho, or Grand Canal, with the river Pei-Ho. As soon as we came alongside the jetty, we collected our baggage and went ashore. Here another thing struck me. Nikola seemed to be as well known in this place as he was in Shanghai, and as soon as we arrived on the Bund called 'rickshaws, and the coolies conveyed us, without asking a question, to the residence of a certain Mr. Williams in the European Concession.

This proved to be a house of modest size, built in the fashion usual in that part of the East. As we alighted from our 'rickshaws, a tall, elderly man, with a distinctly handsome cast of countenance, came into the verandah to welcome us. Seeing Nikola, he for a moment appeared to be overcome with surprise.

"Can it be possible that I see Dr. Nikola?" he cried.

"It is not only possible, but quite certain that you do," said Nikola, who signed to the coolie to lift his bag out, and then went up the steps. "It is two years since I had the pleasure of seeing you, Mr. Williams, and now I look at you you don't seem to have changed much since we taught Mah Feng that lesson in Seoul."

"You have not forgotten that business then, Dr. Nikola?"

"No more than Mah P'eng had when I saw him last in Singapore," my companion answered with a short laugh.

"And what can I do for you now?"

"I want you to let us tax your hospitality for a few hours," said Nikola. "This is my friend, Mr. Bruce, with whom I am engaged on an important piece of work."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," said Mr. Williams, and having shaken hands with me he escorted us into the house.

Ten minutes later we were quite at home in his residence, and were waiting, myself impatiently, for a communication from Laohwan. And here I must pay another tribute to Nikola's powers of self-concentration. Anxious as the time was, peculiar as was our position, he did not waste a moment in idle conjecture, but taking from his travelling bag an abstruse work on chemistry, which was his invariable companion, settled himself down to a study of it; even when the messenger *did* come he did not stop at once, but continued the calculations upon which he was engaged until they were finished, when he directed Laohwan to inform him as to the progress he had made.

"Your arrival," said the latter, "is expected, and though I have not been to the place, I have learned that preparations are being made for your reception."

"In that case you had better purchase ponies and have the men in readiness, for in all probability we shall leave for Pekin to-morrow morning."

"At what time will your Excellency visit the house?" asked Laohwan.

"Some time between half-past ten and eleven this evening," answered Nikola; and thereupon our trusty retainer left us.

At seven o'clock our evening meal was served, After it was finished I smoked a pipe in the verandah while Nikola went into a neighbouring room for half an hour's earnest conversation with our host. When he returned he informed me that it was time for us to dress, and thereupon we went to our respective rooms and attired ourselves in our Chinese costumes. Having done this we let ourselves out by a side door and set off for the native city. It was fully half-past ten before we reached it, but for an infinity of reasons we preferred to allow those who were expecting us to wait rather than we should betray any appearance of hurry.

Any one who has had experience of Tientsin will bear me out when I say that of all the dirty and pestilential holes this earth of ours possesses, there are very few to equal it, and scarcely one that can surpass it. Narrow, irregular streets, but little wider than an average country lane in England, run in and out, and twist and twine in every conceivable direction.

Overhead the second stories of the houses, decorated with sign-boards, streamers and flags, almost touch each other, so that even in the middle of the day a peculiar, dim, religious light prevails. At night, as may be supposed, it is pitch dark. And both by day and night it smells abominably.

Arriving at the end of the street to which we had been directed, we left our conveyances, and proceeded for the remainder of the distance on foot. Halfway down this particular thoroughfare--which was a little wider, and certainly a degree more respectable than its neighbours--we were met by Loahwan, who conducted us to the house of which we were in search.

In outward appearance it was not unlike its fellows, was one story high, had large overhanging eaves, a sort of trellis-shielded verandah, and a low, arched doorway. Upon this last our Chinese companion thumped with his fist, and at the third repetition the door was opened. Laohwan said something in a low voice to the janitor, who thereupon admitted us.

"There is but one sun," said the guardian of the gate humbly.

"But there be many stars," said Nikola; whereupon the man led us as far as the second door in the passage. Arriving at this he muttered a few words. It was instantly opened, and we stepped inside to find another man waiting for us, holding a queer-shaped lamp in his hand. Without questioning us he intimated that we should follow him, which we did, down a long passage, to bring up finally at a curtained archway. Drawing the curtain aside, he bade us pass through, and then redrew it after us.

On the other side of the arch we found ourselves in a large room, the floor, walls, and ceiling of which were made of some dark wood, probably teak. It was unfurnished save for a few scrolled banners suspended at regular intervals upon the walls, and a few cushions in a corner. When we entered it was untenanted, but we had not long to wait before our solitude was interrupted. I had turned to speak to Nikola, who was examining a banner on the left wall, when suddenly a quiet footfall behind me attracted my attention. I wheeled quickly round to find myself confronted by a Chinaman whose age could scarcely have been less than eighty years. His face was wrinkled like a sun-dried crab-apple, his hair was almost white, and he walked with a stick. One thing struck me as particularly curious about his appearance. Though the house in which we found ourselves was by no means a small one, though it showed every sign of care, and in places even betokened the possession of considerable wealth on the part of its owner, this old man, who was undoubtedly the principal personage in it, was clad in garments that evidenced the deepest poverty. When he reached Nikola, whom he seemed to consider, as indeed did every one else, the chief of our party, he bowed low before him, and after the invariable compliments had been exchanged, said:

"Your Excellency has been anxiously expected. All the arrangements for your progress onward have been made this week past."

"I was detained in Tsan-Chu," said Nikola. "Now tell me what has been done?"

"News has been sent on to Peking," said the old man, "and the chief priest will await you in the Llamaserai. I can tell you no more."

"I am satisfied. And now let us know what has been said about my coming."

"It is said that they who have chosen have chosen wisely."

"That is good," said Nikola. "Now leave us; I am tired and would be alone. I shall remain the night in this house and go onwards at daybreak to-morrow morning. See that I am not disturbed."

The old man assured Nikola that his wishes should be respected, and having done so left the room. After he had gone Nikola drew me to the further end of the apartment and whispered hurriedly:

"I see it all now. Luck is playing into our hands. If I can only get hold of the two men I want to carry this business through, I'll have the society's secret or die in the attempt. Listen to me. When we arrived to-night I learnt from Williams, who knows almost as much of the under life of China as I do myself, that what I suspected has already taken place. In other words, after this long interval, there has been an election to fill the place of the man whom China Pete killed in the Llamaserai to obtain possession of that stick. The man chosen is the chief priest of the Llama temple of Hankow, a most religious and extraordinary person. He is expected in Peking either this week or next. Misled by Laohwan, these people have mistaken me for him, and I mean that they shall continue in their error. If they find that we are hoodwinking them we are dead men that instant, but if they don't and we can keep this other man out of the way, we stand an excellent chance of getting from them all we want to know. It is a tremendous risk, but as it is an opportunity that might never come again, we

must make the most of it. Now attend carefully to me. It would never do for me to leave this place to-night, but it is most imperative that I should communicate with Williams. I must write a letter to him, and you must take it. He must send two cablegrams first thing to-morrow morning."

So saying he drew from a pocket inside his sleeve a small notebook, and, what seemed strangely incongruous, a patent American fountain pen. Seating himself upon the floor he began to write. For nearly five minutes complete silence reigned in the room, then he tore two or three leaves from the book and handed them to me.

"Take these to Williams," he said. "He must find out where this other man is, without losing an instant, and communicate with the folk to whom I am cabling. Come what may they must catch him before he can get here, and then carry him out to sea. Once there he must not be allowed to land again until you and I are safely back in Shanghai."

"And who is Williams to cable to?"

"To two men in whom I have the greatest confidence. One is named Eastover, and the other Prendergast. He will send them this message."

He handed me another slip of paper.

"To Prendergast and Eastover, care Gregson, Hong-Kong--

"Come Tientsin next boat. Don't delay a moment. When you arrive call on Williams.

"Nikola."



CHAPTER 21. I RESCUE A YOUNG LADY

Having left the room in which Nikola had settled himself I found the same doorkeeper who had admitted us to the house, and who now preceded and ushered me into the street. Once there I discovered that the condition of the night had changed. When we had left Mr. Williams' residence it was bright starlight, now black clouds covered the face of the sky, and as I passed down the street, in the direction of the English Concession, a heavy peal of thunder rumbled overhead. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and, as I could not help thinking, a curious quiet lay upon the native city. There was an air of suppressed excitement about such Chinamen as I met that puzzled me, and when I came upon knots of them at street corners, the scraps of conversation I was able to overhear did not disabuse my mind of the notion that some disturbance was in active preparation. However, I had not time to pay much attention to them. I had to find Mr. Williams' house, give him the letter, and get back to Nikola with as little delay as possible.

At last I reached the Concession, passed the Consul's house, and finally arrived at the bungalow of which I was in search.

A bright light shone from one of the windows, and towards it I directed my steps. On reaching it I discovered the owner of the house seated at a large table, writing. I tapped softly upon the pane, whereupon he rose and came towards me. That he did not recognize me was evident from his reception of me.

"What do you want?" he asked in Chinese as he opened the window.

Bending a little forward, so as to reach his ear, I whispered the following sentence into it: "I should like to ask your honourable presence one simple question."

"This is not the time to ask questions, however simple," he replied; "you must come round in the morning."

"But the morning will be too late," I answered earnestly. "I tell you by the spirit of your ancestors that what I have to say must be said to-night."

"Then come in, and for mercy's sake say it," he replied a little testily, and beckoned me into the room. I did as he desired, and seated myself on the stool before him, covering my hands with my great sleeves in the orthodox fashion. Then, remembering the Chinese love of procrastination, I began to work the conversation in and out through various channels until I saw that his patience was well-nigh exhausted. Still, however, he did not recognize me. Then leaning towards him I said:

"Is your Excellency aware that your house has been watched since sundown?"

"By whom, and for what reason?" he inquired, looking, I thought, a little uncomfortable.

"By three men, and because of two strangers who arrived by the mail boat this afternoon."

"What strangers?" he inquired innocently. But I noticed that he looked at me rather more fixedly than before.

"The man whom we call 'The man with the Devil's eyes' --but whom you call Nikola--and his companion."

I gave Nikola's name as nearly as a Chinaman would be able to pronounce it, and then waited to see what he would say next. That he was disconcerted was plain enough, but that he did not wish to commit himself was also very evident. He endeavoured to temporize; but as this was not to my taste, I revealed my identity by saying in my natural voice and in English:

"It would seem that my disguise is a very good one, Mr. Williams."

He stared at me.

"Surely you are not Mr. Bruce?" he cried.

"I am," I answered; "and what's more, I am here on an important errand. I have brought you a letter from Nikola, which you must read and act upon at once."

As I spoke I produced from a pocket in my sleeve the letter Nikola had given me and handed it to him. He sat down again at the table and perused it carefully. When he had finished, he read it over again, then a third time. Having got it by heart he went across the room to a safe in the corner. This he unlocked, and having opened a drawer, carefully placed the slip of paper in it. Then he came back and took up his old seat again. I noticed that his forehead was contracted with

thought, and that there was an expression of perplexity, and one might have almost said of doubt, about his mouth. At last he spoke.

"I know you are in Nikola's employment, Mr. Bruce," he said, "but are you aware of the contents of this letter?"

"Does it refer to the man who is expected in Pekin to take up the third stick in the society?"

"Yes," he answered slowly, stabbing at his blotting-pad with the point of a pen, "it does. It refers to him very vitally."

"And now you are revolving in your mind the advisability of what Nikola says about abducting him, I suppose?"

"Exactly. Can Nikola be aware, think you, that the man in question was chief priest of one of the biggest Hankow temples?"

"I have no doubt that he is. But you say 'was.' Has the man then resigned his appointment in order to embrace this new calling?"

"Certainly he has."

"Well, in that case it seems to me that the difficulty is considerably lessened."

"In one direction, perhaps; but then it is increased in another. If he is still a priest and we abduct him, then we fight the Government and the Church. On the other hand, if he is no longer a priest, and the slightest suspicion of what we are about to do leaks out, then we shall have to fight a society which is ten times as powerful as any government or priesthood in the world."

"You have Nikola's instructions, I suppose?"

"Yes; and I confess I would rather deal with the Government of China and the millions of the society than disobey him in one single particular. But let me tell you this, Mr. Bruce, if Nikola is pig-headed enough to continue his quest in the face of this awful uncertainty, I would not give a penny piece for either his life or that of the man who accompanies him. Consider for one moment what I mean. This society into whose secrets he is so anxious to penetrate--and how much better he will be when he has done so he alone knows--is without doubt the most powerful in the whole world. If rumour is to be believed, its list of members exceeds twenty millions. It has representatives in almost every town and village in the length and breadth of this great land, to say nothing of Malaysia, Australia and America; its rules are most exacting, and when you reflect for one moment that our friend is going to impersonate one of the three leaders of this gigantic force, with chances of detection menacing him at every turn, you will see for yourself what a foolhardy undertaking it is."

"I must own I agree with you, but still he is Nikola."

"Yes. In that you sum up everything. *He is NIKOLA.*"

"Then what answer am I to take back to him?"

"That I will proceed with the work at once. Stay. I will write it down, that there may be no possible mistake."

So saying he wrote for a moment, and when his letter was completed handed it to me.

I rose to go.

"And with regard to these telegrams?" I said.

"I will dispatch them myself the very moment the office is open," he answered. "I have given Nikola an assurance to that effect in my letter."

"We leave at daybreak for Pekin, so I will wish you good-bye now."

"You have no thought of turning back, I suppose?"

"Not the very slightest."

"You're a plucky man."

"I suppose I must be. But there is an old saying that just meets my case."

"And that is?"

"Needs must when----"

"Well, shall we say when Nikola----?"

"Yes. 'Needs must when Nikola drives.' Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and may good luck go with you."

I shook hands with him at the front door, and then descended the steps and set off on my return to the native city. As I

left the street in which the bungalow stood a clock struck twelve. The clouds, which had been so heavy when I set out, had now drawn off the sky, and it was bright starlight once more.

As I entered the city proper my first impression was in confirmation of my original feeling that something out of the common was about to happen. Nor was I deceived. Hardly had I gone a hundred yards before a tumult of angry voices broke upon my ear. The sound increased in volume, and presently an excited mob poured into the street along which I was making my way. Had it been possible I would have turned into a by-path and so escaped them, but now this was impossible. They had hemmed me in on every side, and, whether I wished it or not, I was compelled to go with them.

For nearly half a mile they carried me on in this fashion, then, leaving the thoroughfare along which they had hitherto been passing, they turned sharply to the right hand and brought up before a moderate-sized house standing at a corner. Wondering what it all might mean, I accosted a youth by my side and questioned him. His answer was brief, but to the point:

"Kueidzu!" (devil), he cried, and picking up a stone hurled it through the nearest window.

The house, I soon discovered, was the residence of a missionary, who, I was relieved to hear, was absent from home. As I could see the mob was bent on wrecking his dwelling I left them to their work and proceeded on my way again. But though I did not know it, I had not done with adventure yet.

As I turned from the street, into another which ran at right angles to it, I heard a shrill cry for help. I immediately stopped and listened in order to discover whence it had proceeded. I had not long to wait, however, for almost at the same instant it rang out again. This time it undoubtedly came from a lane on my right. Without a second's thought I picked up my heels and ran across to it. At first I could see nothing; then at the further end I made out three figures, and towards them I hastened. When I got there I found that one was a girl, the second an old man, who was stretched upon the ground; both were English, but their assailant was an active young fellow of the coolie class. He was standing over the man's body menacing the girl with a knife. My sandals made no noise upon the stones, and as I came up on the dark side of the lane neither of the trio noticed my presence until I was close upon them. But swift as I was I was hardly quick enough, for just as I arrived the girl threw herself upon the man, who at the same instant raised his arm and plunged his knife into her shoulder. It could not have penetrated very deep, however, before my fist was in his face. He rolled over like a ninepin, and for a moment lay on the ground without moving. But he did not remain there very long. Recovering his senses he sprang to his feet and bolted down the street, yelling *"Kueidzu! kueidzu!"* at the top of his voice, in the hope of bringing the mob to his assistance.

Before he was out of sight I was kneeling by the side of the girl upon the ground. She was unconscious. Her face was deadly pale, and I saw that her left shoulder was soaked with blood. From examining her I turned to the old man. He was a fine-looking old fellow, fairly well dressed, and boasting a venerable grey beard. He lay stretched out at full length, and one glance at his face was sufficient to tell me his fate. How it had been caused I could only imagine, but there was no doubt about the fact that he was dead. When I had convinced myself of this I returned to the girl. Her eyes were now open, and as I knelt beside her she asked in English what had happened.

"You have been wounded," I answered.

"And my father?"

There was nothing to be gained by deceiving her, so I said simply:

"I have sad news for you--I fear he is dead."

Upon hearing this she uttered a little cry, and for a moment seemed to lose consciousness again. I did not, however, wait to revive her, but went across to where her father lay, and picking the body up in my arms, carried it across the street to a dark corner. Having placed it there, I returned to the girl, and lifting her on to my shoulder ran down the street in the direction I had come. In the distance I could hear the noise of the mob, who were still engaged wrecking the murdered man's dwelling.

Arriving at the spot where I had stood when I first heard the cry for help, I picked up my old course and proceeded along it to my destination. In something less than ten minutes I had reached the house and knocked, in the way Laohwan had done, upon the door, which was immediately opened to me. I gave the password, and was admitted with my burden. If the custodian of the door thought anything, he did not give utterance to it, and permitted me to reach the second door unmolested.

Again I knocked, and once more the door was opened. But this time I was not to be allowed to pass unchallenged. Though I had given the password correctly, the door-keeper bade me wait while he scrutinized the burden in my arms.

"What have you here?" he asked.

"Have you the right to ask?" I said, assuming a haughty air. "His Excellency has sent for this foreign devil to question her. She has fainted with fright. Now stand aside, or there are those who will make you pay for stopping me."

He looked a trifle disconcerted, and after a moment's hesitation signed to me to pass. I took him at his word, and proceeded into the room where I had left my chief. That Nikola was eagerly expecting me I gathered from the pleasure my appearance seemed to give him.

"You are late," he cried, coming quickly across to me. "I have been expecting you this hour past. But what on earth have you got there?"

"A girl," I answered, "the daughter of a missionary, I believe. She has been wounded, and even now is unconscious. If I had not discovered her she would have been killed by the man who murdered her father."

"But what on earth made you bring her here?"

"What else could I do? Her father is dead, and I believe the mob has wrecked their house."

"Put her down," said Nikola, "and let me look at her."

I did as he bade me, and thereupon he set to work to examine her wound. With a deftness extraordinary, and a tenderness of which one would scarcely have believed him capable, he bathed the wound with water, which I procured from an adjoining room, then, having anointed it with some stuff from a small medicine chest he always carried about with him, he bound it up with a piece of Chinese cloth. Having finished he said:

"Lift her up while I try the effect of this upon her."

From the chest he took a small cut-glass bottle, shaped something like that used by European ladies for carrying smelling-salts, and having opened her mouth poured a few drops of what it contained upon her tongue. Almost instantly she opened her eyes, looked about her, and seeing, as she supposed, two Chinamen bending over her, fell back with an expression of abject terror on her face. But Nikola, who was still kneeling beside her, reassured her, saying in English:

"You need have no fear. You are in safe hands. We will protect you, come what may."

His speech seemed to recall what had happened to her remembrance.

"Oh, my poor father!" she cried. "What have you done with him?"

"To save your life," I answered, "I was compelled to leave his body in the street where I had found it; but it is quite safe."

"I must go and get it," she said. And as she spoke she tried to rise, but Nikola put out his hand and stopped her.

"You must not move," he said. "Leave everything to me. I will take care that your father's body is found and protected."

"But I must go home."

"My poor girl," said Nikola tenderly, "you do not know everything. You have no home to go to. It was wrecked by the mob this evening."

"Oh dear! oh dear! Then what is to become of me? They have killed my father and wrecked our house! And we trusted them so."

Without discussing this point Nikola rose and left the room. Presently he returned, and again approached the girl.

"I have sent men to find your father's body," he said. "It will be conveyed to a safe place, and within half an hour the English Consul will be on the trail of his murderer. Now tell me how it all occurred."

"I will tell you what I can," she answered. "But it seems so little to have brought about so terrible a result. My father and I left our home this evening at half-past seven to hold a service in the little church our few converts have built for us. During the course of the service it struck me repeatedly that there was something wrong, and when we came out and saw the crowd that had collected at the door this impression was confirmed. Whether they intended to attack us or not I cannot say, but just as we were leaving a shout was raised, and instantly off the mob ran, I suppose in the direction of our house. I can see that now, though we did not suspect it then. Fearing to follow in the same direction, we passed down a side street, intending to proceed home by another route. But as we left the main thoroughfare and turned into the dark lane where you found us, a man rushed out upon my father, and with a thick stick, or a bar of iron, felled him to the ground. I endeavoured

to protect him and to divert his attention to myself, whereupon he drew a knife and stabbed me in the shoulder. Then you came up and drove him off."

As she said this she placed her hand upon my arm.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you," she said.

"It was a very small service," I answered, feeling a little confused by her action. "I only wished I had arrived upon the scene earlier."

"Whatever am I to do?"

"Have you any friends in Tientsin?" inquired Nikola. "Any one to whom you can go?"

"No, we know no one at all," the girl replied. "But I have a sister in Pekin, the wife of a missionary there. Could you help me to get so far?"

"Though I cannot take you myself," said Nikola, "if you like I will put you in the way of getting there. In the meantime you must not remain in this house. Do not be alarmed, however; I will see that you are properly taken care of."

Again he left the room, and while he was gone I looked more closely at the girl whom I had rescued. Her age might have been anything from twenty to twenty-three, her face was a perfect oval in shape, her skin was the most delicate I had ever seen, her mouth was small, and her eyes and hair were a beautiful shade of brown. But it was her sweet expression which was the chief charm of her face, and this was destined to haunt me for many a long day to come.

I don't think I can be said to be a ladies' man (somehow or another I have never been thrown much into feminine society), but I must confess when I looked into this girl's sweet face, a thrill, such as I had never experienced before, passed over me.

"How can I ever thank you for your goodness?" she asked simply.

"By bearing your terrible trouble bravely," I answered. "And now, will you consider me impertinent if I ask your name?"

"Why should I? My name is Medwin--Gladys Mary Medwin. And yours?"

"It ought to be Mah Poo in this dress, oughtn't it? In reality it is Wilfred Bruce."

"But if you are an Englishman why are you disguised in this fashion?"

"That, I am sorry to say, I cannot tell you," I answered. "Do you know, Miss Medwin, it is just possible that you may be the last Englishwoman I shall ever speak to in my life?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Again I can only say that I cannot tell you. But I may say this much, that I am going away in a few hours' time to undertake something which, more probably than not, will cost me my life. I don't know why I should say this to you, but one cannot be prosaic at such moments as these. Besides, though our acquaintance is only an hour or so old, I seem to have known you for years. You say I have done you a service; will you do one for me?"

"What can I do?" she asked, placing her little hand upon my arm.

"This ring," I said, at the same time drawing a plain gold circlet from my finger, "was my poor mother's last gift to me. I dare not take it with me where I am going. Would it be too much to ask you to keep it for me? In the event of my not returning, you might promise me to wear it as a little memento of the service you say I have done you to-night. It would be pleasant to think that I have one woman friend in the world."

As I spoke I raised the hand that lay upon my arm, and, holding it in mine, placed the ring upon her finger.

"I will keep it for you with pleasure," she said. "But is this work upon which you are embarking really so dangerous?"

"More so than you can imagine," I replied. "But be sure of this, Miss Medwin, if I do come out of it alive, I will find you out and claim that ring."

"I will remember," she answered, and just as she had finished speaking Nikola re-entered the room.

"My dear young lady," he said hurriedly, "I have made arrangements for your safe conduct to the house of a personal friend, who will do all he can for you while you remain in Tientsin. Then as soon as you can leave this place he will have you escorted carefully to your sister in Pekin. Now I think you had better be going. A conveyance is at the door, and my friend will be waiting to receive you. Mr. Bruce, will you conduct Miss Medwin to the street?"

"You are very good to me."

"Not at all. You will amply compensate me if you will grant me one favour in return."

"How can I serve you?"

"By never referring in any way to the fact of your having met us. When I tell you that our lives will in a great measure depend upon your reticence, I feel sure you will comply with my request."

"Not a word shall escape my lips."

Nikola bowed, and then almost abruptly turned on his heel and walked away. Seeing that his action was meant as a signal that she should depart, I led the way down the passage into the street, where a chair was in waiting. Having placed her in it, I bade her good-bye in a whisper.

"Good-bye," I said. "If ever I return alive I will inquire for you at the house to which you are now going,"

"Good-bye, and may God protect you!"

She took my hand in hers, and next moment I felt something placed in the palm. Then I withdrew it; the coolies took up the poles, and presently the equipage was moving down the street.

I waited until it was out of sight, and then went back into the house, where I found Nikola pacing up and down the room, his hands behind his back and his head bowed low upon his breast. He looked up at me, and, without referring to what had happened, said quickly;

"The ponies will be at the door in an hour's time. If you want any rest you had better take it now. I am going to have an interview with the old man we saw to-night. I want to try and worm some more information for our guidance out of him. Don't leave this room until my return, and, above all, remember in your future dealings with me that I am a chief priest, and **as** such am entitled to the deepest reverence. Always bear in mind the fact that one little mistake may upset all our plans, and may land both our heads on the top of the nearest city gate."

"I will remember," I said. And he thereupon left the room.

When he had gone I put my hand into my pocket and drew out the little keepsake Miss Medwin had given me. It proved to be a small but curiously chased locket, but, to my sorrow, contained no photograph. She had evidently worn it round her neck, for a small piece of faded ribbon was still attached to it. I looked at it for a moment, and then slipped the ribbon round my own neck, for so only could I hope to prevent its being stolen from me. Then I laid myself down upon a mat in a corner, and in less time than it takes to tell fell fast asleep. When I woke it was to find Nikola shaking me by the shoulder.

"Time's up," he said. "The ponies are at the door, and we must be off."

I had hardly collected my faculties and scrambled to my feet before the old man whom I had seen on the previous evening entered the room, bringing with him a meal, consisting principally of rice and small coarse cakes made of maize. We fell to work upon them, and soon had them finished, washing them down with cups of excellent tea.

Our meal at an end, Nikola led the old man aside and said something to him in an undertone, emphasizing his remarks with solemn gestures. Then, with the whole retinue of the house at our heels to do us honour, we proceeded into the courtyard, where Laohwan was in waiting with five ponies. Two were laden with baggage, upon one of the others Nikola seated himself, I appropriated the second, Laohwan taking the third. Then, amid the respectful greeting of the household, the gates were opened, and we rode into the street. We had now embarked upon another stage of our adventures.



CHAPTER 22. ON THE ROAD TO PEKIN

As we left the last house of the native city of Tientsin behind us the sun was in the act of rising. Whatever the others may have felt I cannot say, but this I know, that there was at least one person in the party who was heartily glad to have said good-bye to the town. Though we had only been in it a short time we had passed through such a series of excitements during that brief period as would have served to disgust even such a glutton as Don Quixote himself with an adventurous life.

For the first two or three miles our route lay over a dry mud plain, where the dust, which seemed to be mainly composed of small pebbles, was driven about our ears like hail by the dawn wind. We rode in silence. Nikola, by virtue of his pretended rank, was some yards ahead, I followed next; Laohwan came behind me, and the baggage ponies and the Mafoos (or native grooms) behind him again. I don't know what Nikola was thinking about, but I'm not ashamed to confess that my own thoughts reverted continually to the girl whom I had been permitted the opportunity of rescuing on the previous evening. Her pale sweet face never left me, but monopolized my thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. Though I tried again and again to bring my mind to bear upon the enterprise on which we were embarking, it was of no use; on each occasion I came back to the consideration of a pair of dark eyes and a wealth of nut-brown hair. That I should ever meet Miss Medwin again seemed most unlikely; that I wanted to I will not deny; and while I am about it I will even go so far as to confess that, not once but several times, I found myself wishing, for the self-same reason, that I had thought twice before accepting Nikola's offer. One moment's reflection, however, was sufficient to show me that had I not fallen in with Nikola I should in all probability not only have never known her at all, but, what was more to the point, I should most likely have been in a position where love-making would not only have been foolish, but indeed quite out of the question.

When we had proceeded something like five miles Nikola turned in his saddle and beckoned me to his side.

"By this time," he said, "Prendergast and Eastover will have received the telegrams I requested Williams to dispatch to them. They will not lose a moment in getting on their way, and by the middle of next week they should have the priest of Hankow in their hands. It will take another three days for them to inform us of the fact, which will mean that we shall have to wait at least ten days in Peking before presenting ourselves at the Llamaserai. This being so, we will put up at a house which has been recommended to me in the Tartar city. I shall let it be understood there that I am anxious to undertake a week's prayer and fasting in order to fit myself for the responsibilities I am about to take upon me, and that during that time I can see no one. By the end of the tenth day, I should have heard from Prendergast and know enough to penetrate into the very midst of the monks. After that it should be all plain sailing."

"But do you think your men will be able to abduct this well-known priest without incurring suspicion?"

"They will have to," answered Nikola. "If they don't we shall have to pay the penalty. But there, you need have no sort of fear. I have the most perfect faith in the men. They have been well tried, and I am sure of this, if I were to tell either of them to do anything, however dangerous the task might be, they would not think twice before obeying me. By the way, Bruce, I don't know that you are looking altogether well."

"I don't feel quite the thing," I answered; "my head aches consumedly, but I don't doubt it will soon pass off."

"Well, let us push on. We must reach the rest-house to-night, and to do that we have got a forty-mile ride ahead of us."

It is a well-known fact that though Chinese ponies do not present very picturesque outward appearances, there are few animals living that can equal them in pluck and endurance. Our whole cavalcade, harness and pack-saddles included, might have been purchased for a twenty-pound note; but I very much doubt if the most costly animals to be seen in Rotten Row, on an afternoon in the season, could have carried us half so well as those shaggy little beasts, which stood but little more than thirteen hands.

In spite of the fact that we camped for a couple of hours in the middle of the day, we were at the rest-house, half-way to Peking, before sundown. And a wretched place it proved--a veritable Chinese inn, with small bare rooms, quite unfurnished, and surrounded by a number of equally inhospitable stables.

As soon as we arrived we dismounted and entered the building, on the threshold of which the boorish Chinese landlord received us. His personality was in keeping with his house; but observing that we were strangers of importance he

condescended to depart so far from his usual custom as to show us at least the outward signs of civility. So we chose our rooms and ordered a meal to be instantly prepared. Our blankets were unpacked and spread upon the floor of our bedrooms, and almost as soon as this was done the meal was announced as ready.

It consisted, we discovered, of half a dozen almost raw eggs, two tough fowls, and a curiously cooked mess of pork. The latter dish, as every one knows who has had anything to do with the Celestial Empire, is one of the staple diets of all but Mohammedan Chinamen.

Swarms of beggars, loathsome to a degree, infested the place, begging and whining for any trifle, however insignificant. They crawled about the courtyards and verandahs, and at last became so emboldened by success that they ventured to penetrate our rooms. This was too much of a good thing, and I saw that Nikola thought so too.

When one beggar, more impertinent than the rest, presented himself before us, after having been warned repeatedly, Nikola called Laohwan to him and bade him take the fellow outside and, with the assistance of two coolies, treat him to a supper of bamboo. Any one who has seen this peculiar punishment will never forget it; and at last the man's cries for mercy became so appalling as to warrant my proceeding to the courtyard and bidding them let him go.

After I returned to my room, which adjoined that occupied by Nikola, we sat talking for nearly an hour, and then retired to rest.

But though I disrobed myself of my Chinese garments, and stretched myself out upon the blankets, sleep would not visit my eyelids. Possibly I was a little feverish; at any rate I began to imagine all sorts of horrible things. Strange thoughts crowded upon my brain, and the most uncanny sounds spoke from the silence of the night. Little noises from afar concentrated themselves until they seemed to fill my room. A footfall in the street would echo against the wall with a mysterious distinctness, and the sound of a dog barking in a neighbouring compound was intensified till it might have been the barking of a dozen. So completely did this nervousness possess me that I soon found myself discovering a danger in even the creaking of the boards in an adjoining room, and the chirrup of an insect in the roof.

How long I remained in this state I cannot say. But at last I could bear it no longer. I rose therefore from my bed and was about to pace the room, in the hope of tiring myself into sleeping, when the sound of a stealthy footstep in the corridor outside caught my ears. I stood rooted to the spot, trying to listen, with every pulse in my body pumping like a piston rod. Again it sounded, but this time it was nearer my door. There was a distinct difference, however; it was no longer a human step, as we are accustomed to hear it, but an equalized and heavy shuffling sound that for a moment rather puzzled me. But my mystification was of scarcely an instant's duration. I had heard that sound before in the Manillas the same night that a man in my hotel was murdered. One second's reflection told me that it was made by some one proceeding along the passage upon his hands and knees. But why was he doing it? Then I remembered that the wall on the other side of the corridor was only a foot or two high. The intruder, whoever he might be, evidently did not wish to be seen by the occupants of the rooms across the square. I drew back into a corner, took a long hunting-knife that I always carried with me, from beneath my pillow, and awaited the turn of events. Still the sound continued; but by this time it had passed my door, and as soon as I realized this, I crept towards the passage and looked out.

From where I stood I was permitted a view of the narrow corridor, but it was empty. Instinct told me that the man had entered the room next to mine. Since I had first heard him he would not have had time to get any further. The adjoining apartment was Nikola's, and after the fatigue of the day it was ten chances to one he would be asleep. That the fellow's mission was an evil one it did not require much penetration to perceive. A man does not crawl about lonely corridors, when other men are asleep, on hands and knees, for any good purpose. Therefore, if I wished to save my employer's life, I knew I must be quick about it.

A second later I had left my own room and was hastening up the passage after him. Reaching the doorway I stood irresolute, trying to discover by listening whereabouts in the room the man might be. It was not long before I heard a heavy grunt, followed by a muttered ejaculation. Then I rushed into the room, and across to where I knew Nikola had placed his bed. As I did so I came in contact with a naked body, and next moment we were both rolling and tumbling upon the floor.

It was a unique experience that fight in the dark. Over and over the man and I rolled, clinging to each other and putting forth every possible exertion to secure a victory. Then I heard Nikola spring to his feet, and run towards the door. In response to his cry there was an immediate hubbub in the building, but before lights could reach us I had got the upper hand and was seated across my foe.

Laohwan was the first to put in an appearance, and he brought a torch. Nikola took it from him and came across to us. Signing me to get off the man whom I was holding, he bent down and looked at him.

"Ho, ho!" he said quietly. "This is not burglary then, but vengeance. So, you rogue, you wanted to repay me for the beating you got to-night, did you? It seems I have had a narrow escape."

It was as he said. The man whom I had caught was none other than the beggar whose persistence had earned him a beating earlier in the evening.

"What will your Excellency be pleased to do with him?" asked Laohwan.

Nikola saw his opportunity. He told the man to stand up. Then looking him straight in the eyes for perhaps a minute, he said quietly:

"Open your mouth."

The man did as he was ordered.

"It is impossible for you to shut it again," said Nikola. "Try."

The poor wretch tried and tried in vain. His jaws were as securely fastened as if they had been screwed top and bottom. He struggled with them, he tried to press them together, but in vain; they were firmly fixed and defied him. In his terror he ran about the room, perspiration streaming from his face, and all the time uttering strange cries.

"Come here!" said Nikola. "Stand before me. Now shut your mouth."

Instantly the man closed his mouth.

"Shut your eyes."

The man did as he was ordered.

"You are blind and dumb; you cannot open either your eyes or your mouth."

The man tried, but with the same result as before. His mouth and eyes were firmly sealed. This time his terror was greater than any words could express, and he fell at Nikola's feet imploring him in inarticulate grunts to spare him. The crowd who had clustered at the door stood watching this strange scene open-mouthed.

"Get up!" said Nikola to the miserable wretch at his feet. "Open your mouth and eyes. You would have murdered me, but I have spared you. Try again what you have attempted to-night, and both sight and speech will be instantly taken from you and never again restored. Now go!"

The man did not wait to be bidden twice, but fled as if for his life, parting the crowd at the doorway just as the bows of a steamer turn away the water on either side.

When only Laohwan remained, Nikola called him up.

"Are you aware," he said, "that but for my friend's vigilance here I should now be a dead man? You sleep at the end of the passage, and it was your duty to have taken care that nobody passed you. But you failed in your trust. Now what is your punishment to be?"

In answer the man knelt humbly at his master's feet.

"Answer my question! What is your punishment to be?" the same remorseless voice repeated. "Am I never to place trust in you again?"

"By the graves of my ancestors I swear that I did not know that the man had passed me."

"That is no answer," said Nikola. "You have failed in your duty, and that is a thing, as you know, I never forgive. But as you have been faithful in all else, I will not be too hard upon you. In an hour's time you will saddle your horse and go back to Tientsin, where you will seek out Mr. Williams and tell him that you are unsatisfactory, and that I have sent you back. You will remain with him till I communicate with you again. Fail to see him or to tell him what I have said, and you will be dead in two days. Do you understand me?"

Once more the man bowed low.

"Then go!"

Without a word the fellow rose to his feet and went towards the door. In my own heart I felt sorry for him, and when he had left, I said as much to Nikola, at the same time inquiring if he thought it prudent to make an enemy of a man who held our lives in his hand.

"My friend," he answered, "there is a Hindu proverb which says, 'A servant who cannot be trusted is as a broken lock upon the gateway of your house.' As to what you say about prudence, you need have no fear. I have had many dealings with Laohwan, and he knows me. He would rather die the death of a Thousand Cuts than betray me. But while I am blaming him I am forgetting to do justice to you. One thing is very certain, but for your intervention I should not be talking to you now. I owe you my life. I can only ask you to believe that, if ever the chance occurs, you will not find me ungrateful."

"It was fortunate," I said, "that I heard him pass along the passage, otherwise we might both have perished."

"It was strange, after all the exertions of the day, that you should have been awake. I was sleeping like a top. But let me look at you. Good heavens, man! I told you this morning you were looking ill. Give me your wrist."

He felt my pulse, then stared anxiously into my face. After this he took a small bottle from a travelling medicine-chest, poured a few drops of what it contained into a glass, filled it up from a Chinese water-bottle near by, and then bade me drink it. Having done so I was sent back to bed, and within five minutes of arriving there was wrapped in a dreamless sleep.

When I woke it was broad daylight and nearly six o'clock. I felt considerably better than when I had gone to bed the previous night, but still I was by no means well. What was the matter with me, however, I could not tell.

At seven o'clock an equivalent for breakfast was served to us, and at half-past the ponies were saddled and we proceeded on our journey. As we left the inn I looked about to see if I could discover any signs of poor Loahwan, but as he was not there I could only suppose he had accepted Nikola's decision as final and had gone back to Tientsin.

As usual Nikola rode on ahead, and it was not difficult to see that the story of his treatment of his would-be murderer had leaked out. The awe with which he was regarded by the people with whom we came in contact was most amusing to witness. And you may be sure he fully acted up to the character which had been given him.

After halting as usual at midday we proceeded on our way until four o'clock, when a pleasurable sensation was in store for us. Rising above the monotonous level of the plain were the walls of the great city of Pekin. They seemed to stretch away as far as the eye could reach. As we approached them they grew more imposing, and presently an enormous tower, built in the usual style of Chinese architecture, and pierced with innumerable loop-holes for cannon, appeared in sight. It was not until we were within a couple of hundred yards of it, however, that we discovered that these loop-holes were only counterfeit, and that the whole tower was little more than a sham.

We entered the city by a gateway that would have been considered insignificant in a third-rate Afghan village, and, having paid the tolls demanded of us, wondered in which direction we had best proceed, in order to find the lodgings to which our friend in Tientsin had directed us.

Having pressed a smart-looking youth into our service as guide, we were conducted by a series of tortuous thoroughfares to a house in a mean quarter of the city. By the time we reached it it was quite dark, and it was only after much waiting and repeated knockings upon the door that we contrived to make those within aware of our presence. At last, however, the door opened and an enormously stout Chinaman stood before us.

"What do you want?" he asked of Nikola, who was nearest to him.

"That which only peace can give," said Nikola.

The man bowed low.

"Your Excellency has been long expected," he said.

"If you will be honourably pleased to step inside, all that my house contains is yours."

We followed him through the dwelling into a room at the rear. Then Nikola bade him call in the chief Mafoo, and when he appeared, discharged his account and bade him be gone."

"We are now in Pekin," said Nikola to me as soon as we were alone, "and it behooves us to play our cards with the utmost care. Remember, as I have so often told you, I am a man of extreme sanctity, and I shall guide my life and actions accordingly. There is, as you see, a room leading out of this. In it I shall take up my abode. You will occupy this one. It must be your business to undertake that no one sees me. And you must allow it to be understood that I spend my time almost exclusively in study and upon my devotions. Every night when darkness falls I shall go out and endeavour to collect the information of which we stand in need. You will have charge of the purse and must arrange our commissariat."

Half an hour later our evening meal was served, and when we had eaten it, being tired, we went straight to bed. But I

was not destined to prove of much assistance to my friend, for next morning when I woke my old sickness had returned upon me, my skin was dry and cracked, and my head ached to distraction. I could eat no breakfast, and I could see that Nikola was growing more and more concerned about my condition.

After breakfast I went for a walk. But I could not rid myself of the heaviness which had seized me, so returned to the house feeling more dead than alive. During the afternoon I lay down upon my bed, and in a few minutes lost consciousness altogether.



CHAPTER 23. A SERIOUS TIME

It was broad daylight when I recovered consciousness, the sunshine was streaming into my room, and birds were twittering in the trees outside. But though I sat up and looked about me I could make neither head nor tail of my position; there was evidently something wrong about it. When I had fallen asleep, as I thought, my couch had been spread upon the floor, and was composed of Chinese materials. Now I lay upon an ordinary English bedstead, boasting a spring mattress, sheets, blankets, and even a counterpane. Moreover, the room itself was different. There was a carpet upon the floor, and several pretty pictures hung upon the walls. I felt certain they had not been there when I was introduced to the apartment. Being, however, too weak to examine these wonders for very long, I laid myself down upon my pillow again and closed my eyes. In a few moments I was once more asleep and did not wake until towards evening.

When I did it was to discover some one sitting by the window reading. At first I looked at her--for it was a woman--without very much interest. She seemed part of a dream from which I should presently wake to find myself back again in the Chinese house with Nikola. But I was to be disabused of this notion very speedily.

After a while the lady in the chair put down her book, rose, and came across to look at me. *Then it was that I realized a most astounding fact; she was none other than Miss Medwin, the girl I had rescued in Tientsin!* She touched my hand with her soft fingers, to see if I were feverish, I suppose, and then poured into a medicine-glass, which stood upon a table by my side, some doctor's physic. When she put it to my lips I drank it without protest and looked up at her.

"Don't leave me, Miss Medwin," I said, half expecting that, now I was awake, she would gradually fade away and disappear from my sight altogether.

"I am not going to leave you," she answered; "but I am indeed rejoiced to see that you recognise me again."

"What is the matter with me, and where am I?" I asked.

"You have been very ill," she answered, "but you are much better now. You are in my brother-in-law's house in Pekin."

I was completely mystified.

"In your brother-in-law's house," I repeated. "But how on earth did I get here? How long have I been here? and where is Nikola?"

"You have been here twelve days to-morrow," she answered; "you were taken ill in the city, and as you required careful nursing, your friend, Dr. Nikola, had you conveyed here. Where he is now I cannot tell you; we have only seen him once. For my own part I believe he has gone into the country, but in which direction, and when he will be back, I am afraid I have no idea. Now you have talked quite enough, you must try and go to sleep again."

I was too weak to disobey her, so I closed my eyes, and in a few minutes was in the land of Nod, once more.

Next day I was so much stronger that I was able to sit up and partake of more nourishing food, and, what was still more to my taste, I was able to have a longer conversation with my nurse. This did me more good than any doctor's physic, and at the end of half an hour I was a different man. The poor girl was still grieving for her father, and I noticed that the slightest reference to Tientsin flooded her eyes with tears. From what I gathered later the Consul had acted promptly and energetically, with the result that the ringleaders of the mob which had wrecked the house had been severely punished, while the man who had gone further and murdered the unfortunate missionary himself had paid the penalty of his crime with his life.

Miss Medwin spoke in heartfelt terms of the part I had played in the tragic affair, and it was easy to see that she was also most grateful to Nikola for the way in which he had behaved towards her. Acting on his employer's instructions, Williams had taken her in and had at once communicated with the Consul. Then when Mr. Medwin had been buried in the English cemetery and the legal business connected with his murder was completed, trustworthy servants had been obtained, and she had journeyed to Pekin in the greatest comfort.

During the morning following she brought me some beef-tea, and, while I was drinking it, sat down beside my bed.

"I think you might get up for a little while this afternoon, Mr. Bruce," she said; "you seem so much stronger."

"I should like to," I answered. "I must do everything in my power to regain my strength. My illness has been a most unfortunate one, and I expect Nikola will be very impatient."

At this she looked a little mortified, I thought, and an instant later I saw what a stupid thing I had said.

"I am afraid you will think me ungrateful," I hastened to remark; "but believe me I was looking at it from a very different standpoint. I feel more gratitude to you than I can ever express. When I said my illness was unfortunate, I meant that at such a critical period of our affairs my being incapacitated from work was most inconvenient. You do not think that I am not properly sensible of your kindness, do you?"

As I spoke I assumed possession of her hand, which was hanging down beside her chair. She blushed a little and lowered her eyes.

"I am very glad we were able to take you in," she answered. "I assure you my brother and sister were most anxious to do so, when they heard what a service you had rendered me. But, Mr. Bruce, I want to say something to you. You talk of this critical position in your affairs. You told me in Tientsin that if you continued the work upon which you were embarking you 'might never come out of it alive.' Is it quite certain that you *must* go on with it--that you *must* risk your life in this way?"

"I regret to say it is. I have given my word and I cannot draw back. If you only knew how hard it is for me to say this I don't think you would try to tempt me."

"But it seems to me so wicked to waste your life in this fashion."

"I have always wasted my life," I answered, rather bitterly. "Miss Medwin, you don't know what a derelict I am. I wonder if you would think any the worse of me if I told you that when I took up this matter upon which I am now engaged I was in abject destitution, and mainly through my own folly? I am afraid I am no good for anything but getting into scrapes and wriggling my way out of them again."

"I expect you hardly do yourself justice," she answered. "I cannot believe that you are as unfortunate as you say."

As she spoke there was a knock at the door, and in response to my call "come in," a tall handsome man entered the room. He bore the unmistakable impress of a missionary, and might have been anything from thirty to forty years of age.

"Well, Mr. Bruce," he said cheerily, as he came over to the bed and held out his hand, "I am glad to hear from my sister that you are progressing so nicely. I should have come in to see you, but I have been away from home. You have had a sharp touch of fever, and, if you will allow me to say so, I think you are a lucky man to have got over it so satisfactorily."

"I have to express my thanks to you," I said, "for taking me into your house; but for your care I cannot imagine what would have become of me."

"Oh, you mustn't say anything about that," answered Mr. Benfleet, for such was his name. "We English are only a small community in Pekin, and it would be indeed a sorry thing if we did not embrace chances of helping each other whenever they occur."

As he said this I put my hand up to my head. Immediately I was confronted with a curious discovery. When I was taken ill I was dressed as a Chinaman, wore a pigtail, and had my skin stained a sort of pale mahogany. What could my kind friends have thought of my disguise?

It was not until later that I discovered that I had been brought to the house in complete European attire, and that when Nikola had called upon Mr. and Mrs. Benfleet to ask them to take me in he had done so clad in orthodox morning dress and wearing a solar topee upon his head.

"Gladys tells me you are going to get up this afternoon," said Mr. Benfleet. "I expect it will do you good. If I can be of any service to you in your dressing I hope you will command me."

I thanked him, and then, excusing himself on the plea that his presence was required at the mission-house, he bade me good-bye and left the room.

I was about to resume my conversation with Miss Medwin, but she stopped me.

"You must not talk any more," she said with a pretty air of authority. "I am going to read to you for half an hour, and then I shall leave you to yourself till it is time for tiffin. After that I will place your things ready for you, and you must get up."

She procured a book, and seating herself by the window, opened it and began to read. Her voice was soft and musical, and she interpreted the author's meaning with considerable ability. I am afraid, however, I took but small interest in the story; I was far too deeply engaged watching the expressions chasing each other across her face, noting the delicate

shapeliness and whiteness of the hands that held the book, and the exquisite symmetry of the little feet and ankles that peeped beneath her dress. I think she must have suspected something of the sort, for she suddenly looked up in the middle of a passage which otherwise would have monopolized her whole attention. Her heightened colour and the quick way in which the feet slipped back beneath their covering confirmed this notion. She continued her reading, it is true, but there was not the same evenness of tone as before, and once or twice I noticed that the words were rather slurred over, as if the reader were trying to think of two things at one and the same time. Presently she shut the book with a little snap and rose to her feet.

"I think I must go now and see if I can help my sister in her work," she said hurriedly.

"Thank you so much for reading to me," I answered. "I have enjoyed it very much."

Whether she believed what I said or not I could not tell, but she smiled and looked a little conscious, as if she thought there might possibly be another meaning underlying my remark. After that I was left to myself for nearly an hour. During that time I surrendered myself to my own thoughts. Some were pleasant, others were not; but there was one conclusion to which I inevitably, however much I might digress, returned. That conclusion was that of all the girls I had ever met, Miss Gladys Medwin was by far the most adorable. She seemed to possess all the graces and virtues with which women are endowed, and to have the faculty of presenting them to the best advantage. I could not help seeing that my period of convalescence was likely to prove a very pleasant one, and you will not blame me, I suspect, if I registered a vow to make the most of it. How long I should be allowed to remain with them it was impossible for me to say. Nikola, my Old Man of the Sea, might put in an appearance at any moment, and then I should be compelled to bid my friends good-bye in order to plunge once more into his mysterious affairs.

When tiffin was finished I dressed myself in the garments which had been put out for me, and as soon as my toilet was completed took Mr. Benfleet's arm and proceeded to a terrace in the garden at the back of the house. Here chairs had been placed for us, and we sat down. I looked about me, half expecting to find Miss Medwin waiting for us, but she did not put in an appearance for some considerable time. When she did, she expressed herself as pleased to see me about again, and then went across to where a little Chinese dog was lying in the sunshine at the foot of a big stone figure. Whether she was always as fond of the little cur I cannot say, but the way she petted and caressed it on this particular occasion would have driven most men mad with jealousy. I don't know that I am in any way a harsh man with animals, but I am afraid if I had been alone and that dog had come anywhere near me I should have been tempted to take a stick to him, and to have treated him to one of the finest beatings he had ever enjoyed in his canine existence.

Presently she looked up, and, seeing that I was watching her, returned to where we sat, uttered a few commonplaces, more than half of which were addressed to her brother-in-law, and finally made an excuse and returned to the house. To say that I was disappointed would scarcely be the truth; to describe myself as woefully chagrined would perhaps be nearer the mark. Had I offended her, or was this the way of women? I had read in novels that it was their custom, if they thought they had been a little too prodigal of their favours whilst a man was in trouble, to become cold and almost distant to him when he was himself again. If this were so, then her action on this particular occasion was only in the ordinary course of things, and must be taken as such. That I was in love I will not attempt to deny; it was, however; the first time I had experienced the fatal passion, and, like measles caught in later life, it was doubly severe. For this reason the treatment to which I had just been subjected was not, as may be expected, of a kind calculated to make my feelings easier.

Whether Mr. Benfleet thought anything I cannot say, he certainly said nothing to me upon the subject. If, however, my manner, after Miss Medwin's departure did not strike him as peculiar, he could not have been the clear-headed man of the world his Pekin friends believed him. All I know is that when I returned to the house, I was about as irritable a piece of man-flesh as could have been found in that part of Asia.

But within the hour I was to be treated to another example of the strange contrariness of the feminine mind. No sooner had I arrived in the house than everything was changed. It was hoped that I had not caught a fresh cold; the most comfortable chair was set apart for my use, and an unnecessary footstool was procured and placed at my feet. Altogether I was the recipient of as many attentions and as much insinuated sympathy as I had been subjected to coldness before. I did not know what to make of it; however, under its influence, in less than half an hour I had completely thawed, and my previous ill-temper was forgotten for good and all.

Next day I was so much stronger that I was able to spend the greater part of my time in the garden. On this occasion,

both Mr. and Mrs. Benfleet being otherwise engaged, Miss Medwin was good enough to permit me a considerable amount of her company. You may be sure I made the most of it, and we whiled the time away chatting pleasantly on various subjects.

At tiffin, to which I sat up for the first time, it was proposed that during the afternoon we should endeavour to get as far as the Great Wall, a matter of a quarter of a mile's walk. Accordingly, as soon as the meal was over, we set off. The narrow streets were crowded with coolies, springless private carts, sedan chairs, ponies but little bigger than St. Bernard dogs, and camels, some laden with coal from the Western Hills, and others bearing brick-tea from Peking away up into the far north. Beggars in all degrees of loathsomeness, carrying the scars of almost every known ailment upon their bodies, and in nine cases out of ten not only able but desirous of presenting us with a replica of the disease, swarmed round us, and pushed and jostled us as we walked. Add to this the fact that at least once in every few yards we were assailed with scornful cries and expressions that would bring a blush to the cheek of the most blasphemous coalheaver in existence, accompanied by gestures which made my hands itch to be upon the faces of those who practised them. Mix up with all this the sights and smells of the foulest Eastern city you can imagine, add to it the knowledge that you are despised and hated by the most despicable race under the sun, fill up whatever room is left with the dust that lies on a calm day six inches deep upon the streets, and in a storm--and storms occur on an average at least three times a week--covers one from head to foot with a coating of the vilest impurity, you will have derived but the smallest impression of what it means to take a walk in the Streets of Peking. To the Englishman who has never travelled in China this denunciation may appear a little extravagant. My regret, however, is that personally I do not consider it strong enough.

Not once but a hundred times I found good reason to regret having brought Miss Medwin out. But, thank goodness, we reached the Wall at last.

Having once arrived there, we seated ourselves on a bastion, and looked down upon the city. It was an extraordinary view we had presented to us. From the Wall we could see the Chi-en-Men, or Great Gate; to the north lay the Tartar city. Just below us was a comparatively small temple, round which a multitude of foot-passengers, merchants, coolies, carts, camels, ponies, private citizens, beggars, and hawkers, pushed and struggled. Over our heads rose the two great towers, which form part of the Wall itself, while to right and left, almost as far as the eye could reach, and seeming to overlap each other in endless confusion, were the roofs of the city, covered, in almost every instance, with a quantity of decaying brown grass, and in many cases having small trees and shrubs growing out of the interstices of the stones themselves. Away in the distance we could see the red wall of the "Forbidden City," in other words, the Imperial Palace; on another side was the Great Bell Tower, with the Great Drum Tower near it, and farther still the roofs of the Lamasera. The latter, as you will suppose, had a particular attraction for me, and once having seen them, I could hardly withdraw my eyes.

When we had examined the view and were beginning to contemplate making our way home again, I turned to my companion and spoke the thoughts which were in my mind.

"I suppose, now that I am well again, I shall soon have to be leaving you," I began. "It cannot surely be very long before I hear from Nikola."

She was quiet for a moment, and then said:

"You mustn't be angry with me, Mr. Bruce, if I tell you that I do not altogether like your friend. He frightens me."

"Why on earth should he?" I asked, as if it were a most unusual effect for Nikola to produce. Somehow I did not care to tell her that her opinion was shared by almost as many people as knew him.

"I don't know why I fear him," she answered, "unless it is because he is so different from any other man I have ever met. Don't laugh at me if I tell you that I always think his eyes are like those of a snake, so cold and passionless, yet seeming to look you through and through, and hold you fascinated until he withdraws them again. I never saw such eyes in my life before, and I hope I never may again."

"And yet he was very kind to you."

"I can't forget that," she answered, "and it makes me seem so ungrateful; but one cannot help one's likes and dislikes, can one?"

Here I came a little closer to her.

"I hope, Miss Medwin, you have not conceived such a violent antipathy to me?" I said.

She began to pick at the mud between the great stones on which we were sitting.

"No, I don't think I have," she answered softly, seeming to find a source of interest in the movements of a tiny beetle which had come out of a hole, and was now making its way towards us.

"I am glad of that," I replied; "I should like you to think well of me."

"I am sure I do," she answered. "Think how much I owe to you. Oh, that dreadful night! I shall never be able to drive the horror of it out of my mind. Have you forgotten it?"

I saw that she was fencing with me and endeavouring to divert the conversation to a side issue. This I was not going to permit. I looked into her face, but she turned away and stared at a cloud of dun-coloured dust that was rising on the plain behind.

"Miss Medwin," I said, "I suppose into the life of every man there must, sooner or later, come one woman who will be all the world to him. Gladys, can you guess what I am going to say?"

Once more she did not answer; but the unfortunate beetle, who had crawled unnoticed within reach of her foot, received his death-blow. And yet at ordinary times she was one of the kindest and most gentle of her sex. This significant little action showed me more than any words could have done how perturbed her feelings were.

"I was going to say," I continued, "that at last a woman--the one woman, of all others--has come into *my* life. Are you glad to hear it?"

"How can I be if I do not know her?" she protested feebly.

"If *you* do not," I said, "then nobody else does. Gladys, *you* are that woman. I know I have no right to tell you this, seeing what my present position is, but God knows I cannot help it. You are dearer to me than all the world; I have loved you since I first saw you. Can you love me a little in return? Speak your mind freely, tell me exactly what is in your heart, and, come what may, I will abide by your decision."

She was trembling violently, but not a word passed her lips. Her face was very pale, and she seemed to find a difficulty in breathing, but at any cost I was going to press her for an answer. I took her hand.

"What have you to say to me, Gladys?"

"What *can* I say?"

"Say that you love me," I answered.

"I love you," she answered, so softly that I could scarcely hear the words.

And then, in the face of all Pekin, I kissed her on the lips.

Once in most men's lives--and for that reason I suppose in most women's also--there comes a certain five minutes when they understand exactly what unalloyed happiness means--a five minutes in their little spans of existence when the air seems to ring with joy-bells, when time stands still, and there is no such thing as care. That was how I felt at the moment of which I am writing. I loved and *was* loved; but almost before I had time to realize my happiness a knowledge of my real position sprang up before my eyes, and I was cast down into the depths again. What right had I, I asked myself, to tell a girl that I loved her, when it was almost beyond the bounds of possibility that I could ever make her my wife? None at all. I had done a cruel thing, and now I must go forward into the jaws of death, leaving behind me all that could make life worth living, and with the knowledge that I had brought pain into the one life of all others I desired to be free from it. True, I did not doubt but that if I appealed to Nikola he would let me off my bargain, but would that be fair when I had given my word that I would go on with him? No, there was nothing for it but for me to carry out my promise and trust to Fate to bring me safely back again to the woman I loved.

The afternoon was fast slipping by, and it was time for us to be thinking about getting home. I was disposed to hurry, for I had no desire to take a lady through the streets of Pekin after dusk. They, the streets, were bad enough in the daytime, at night they were ten times worse. We accordingly descended from the Wall, and in about ten minutes had reached the Benfleets' bungalow once more.

By the time we entered the house I had arrived at a determination. As an honourable man there were only two courses open to me: one was to tell Mr. Benfleet the state of my affections, the other to let Gladys firmly understand that, until I returned--if return I did--from the business for which I had been engaged, I should not consider her bound to me in any shape or form. Accordingly, as soon as the evening meal was finished, I asked the missionary if he could permit me five minutes' conversation alone. He readily granted my request, but not, I thought, without a little cloud upon his face. We

passed into his study, which was at the other end of the building, and when we got there he bade me take a seat, saying as he did so:

"Well, Mr. Bruce, what is it you have to say to me?"

Now I don't think I am a particularly nervous man, but I will confess to not feeling at my ease in this particular situation. I cast about me for a way to begin my explanation, but for the life of me I could find none that suited me.

"Mr. Benfleet," I said at last in desperation, "you will probably be able to agree with me when I assert that you know very little about me."

"I think I can meet you there," said the clergyman with a smile. "If I am to be plain with you, I will admit that I know *very* little about you."

"I could wish that you knew more."

"For what reason?"

"To be frank, for a very vital one. You will understand when I tell you that I proposed to your sister-in-law, Miss Medwin, this afternoon."

"I must confess I thought you would," he said. "There have been signs and wonders in the land, and though Mrs. Benfleet and I live in Pekin, we are still able to realize what the result is likely to be when a man is as attentive to a girl as you have been to my sister-in-law of late."

"I trust you do not disapprove?"

"Am I to say what I think?"

"By all means. I want you to be perfectly candid."

"Then I am afraid I must say that I *do* disapprove."

"You have, of course, a substantial reason?"

"I don't deny it is one that time and better acquaintance might possibly remove. But first let us consider the light in which you stand to us. Until a fortnight or so ago, neither I, my wife, nor Miss Medwin were aware that there was such a person in the world. But you were ill, and we took you in, knowing nothing, remember, as to your antecedents. You will agree with me, I think, that an English gentleman who figures in Chinese costume, and does not furnish a reason for it, and who perambulates China with a man who is very generally feared, is not the sort of person one would go out of one's way to accept for the husband of a sister one loves. But I am not a bigoted man, and I know that very often when a man has been a bit wild a good woman will do him more good than ever the Archbishop of Canterbury and all his clergy could effect. If you love her you will set yourself to win her, and, in sporting parlance, this is a race that will have to be won by waiting. If you think Gladys is worth working and waiting for, you will do both, and because I like what I have seen of you I will give you every opportunity in my power of achieving your end. If you don't want to work or to wait for her, then you will probably sheer off after this conversation, in which case we shall be well rid of you. And vice versa. One thing, however, I think would be prudent, and that is that you should leave my house to-morrow morning."

For the whole of the time that I was absent with Nikola we would not communicate in any way. By this means we should be able to find out the true state of our own minds, and whether our passion was likely to prove lasting or not.

"But oh! how I wish that I knew what you are going to do," said Gladys, when we had discussed the matter in all its bearings save one.

"I am afraid that is a thing I cannot tell even you," I answered. "I am hemmed in on every side by promises. You must trust me, Gladys."

"It isn't that I don't trust you," she said, with almost a sob in her voice. "I am thinking of the dangers you will run, and of the long time that will elapse before I shall hear of you or see you again."

"I'm afraid that cannot be helped," I said. "If I had only met you before I embarked on this wild-goose chase things might have been arranged differently, but now I have made my bed and must lie upon it."

"As I said this afternoon, I am so afraid of Nikola."

"But you needn't be. I get on very well with him, and as long as I play fair by him he will play fair by me. You might tremble for my safety if we were enemies, but so long as we remain friends I assure you you need have no fear."

"And you are to leave us to-morrow morning?"

“Yes, darling, I *must* go! As we are placed towards each other, more than friends, and yet in the eyes of the world, less than lovers, it would hardly do for me to remain here. Besides, I expect Nikola will be requiring my services. And now, before I forget it, I want you to give me the ring I gave you in Tientsin.”

She left the room to return with it in a few moments. I took it from her and, raising her hand, placed it upon her finger, kissing her as I did so.

“I will wear it always,” she said; as she spoke, Mrs. Benfleet entered the room. A moment later I caught the sound of a sharp, firm footstep in the passage that was unpleasantly familiar to me. Then Nikola entered and stood before us.



CHAPTER 24. HOW PRENDERGAST SUCCEEDED

To say that I was surprised at Nikola's sudden entry into the Benfleets' drawing-room would be to put too tame a construction upon my feelings. Why it should have been so I cannot say, but Nikola's appearance invariably seemed to cause me astonishment. And curiously enough I was not alone in this feeling; for more than one person of my acquaintance has since owned to having experienced the same sensation. What it was about the man that produced it, it would be difficult to say. At any rate this much is certain, it would be impossible for Nikola to say or do a common-place thing. When he addressed you, you instinctively felt that you must answer him plainly and straightforwardly, or not at all; an evasive reply was not suited to the man. It occurred to you, almost unconsciously, that he was entitled to your best service, and it is certain that whether he was worthy or not he invariably got it. I have seen Nikola take in hand one of the keenest and, at the same time, most obstinate men in China, ask of him a favour which it would have been madness to expect the fellow to grant, talk to Kirn in his own quiet but commanding fashion, and in less than ten minutes have the matter settled and the request granted.

One other point struck me as remarkable in this curious individual's character, and that was that he always seemed to know, before you spoke, exactly what sort of answer you were going to return to his question, and as often as not he would anticipate your reply. In my own case I soon began to feel that I might spare myself the trouble of answering at all.

Having entered the room, he crossed to where Gladys was sitting and, bowing as he took her hand, wished her good-evening. Then turning to me, and accompanying his remark with one of his indescribable smiles, he said--

"My dear Bruce, I am rejoiced to see you looking so well. I had expected to find a skeleton, and to my delight I am confronted with a man. How soon do you think you will be fit to travel again?"

"I am ready as soon as you are," I answered, but not without a sinking in my heart as I looked across to Gladys and realized that the moment had indeed come for parting.

"I am indeed glad to hear it," he answered, "for time presses. Do you think you can accompany me in a few minutes? You can?--that's right. Now, if he will permit me, I should like to have a little talk with Mr. Benfleet, and then we must be off."

He went out of the room, accompanied by our hostess, and for ten minutes or so Gladys and I were left alone.

I will give you no description of what happened during that last interview. Such a parting is far too sacred to be described. It is enough to say that when it was over I joined Nikola in the verandah and we left the house together. With the shutting of the front door behind us all the happiness of my life seemed to slip away from me. For nearly five minutes I walked by my companion's side in silence, wondering whether I should ever again see those to whom I had just said good-bye. Nikola must have had some notion of what was passing in my mind, for he turned to me and said confidentially--

"Cheer up, Bruce! we shall be back again before you know where you are, and remember you will then be a comparatively rich man. Miss Medwin is a girl worth waiting for, and if you will allow me to do so, I will offer you my congratulations."

"How do you know anything about it?" I asked in surprise.

"Haven't I just seen Mr. Benfleet?" he answered.

"But surely he didn't tell you?"

"It was exactly what I went in to see him about," said Nikola. "You are my friend, and I owe you a good turn; for that reason, I wanted to try and make things as smooth for you as I could. To tell the truth, I am glad this has happened; it will make you so much the more careful. There's nothing like love--though I am not a believer in it as a general rule--for making a man mindful of his actions."

"It is very good of you to take so much trouble about my affairs," I said warmly.

"Not at all," he answered. "There can be no question of trouble between two men situated as we are. But now let us march along as quickly as we can. I have a lot to talk to you about, and we have many preparations to make before to-morrow morning."

"But where are we going? This is not the way back to the house in which I was taken ill."

"Of course not," said Nikola. "We're going to another place--the property of an Englishman of my acquaintance. There we shall change into our Chinese dresses again."

"This, then, will probably be our last walk in European costume?"

"For many months at any rate."

After this we again walked some time without speaking, Nikola revolving in his mind his interminable intrigues, I suppose; I thinking of the girl I had left behind me. At last, however, we reached the house to which we had been directing our steps, and, on knocking upon the door, were at once admitted. It was a tiny place, situated in a side street leading out of a busy thoroughfare. The owner was an Englishman, whose business often necessitated his taking long journeys into the interior; he was a bachelor, and, as I gathered from Nikola, by no means particular as to his associates, nor, I believe, did he bear any too good a reputation in Pekin. Before I had been five minutes in his company I had summed the man up exactly, though I could not for the life of me understand why Nikola had chosen him. That he was afraid of Nikola was self-evident, and that Nikola intended he should be was equally certain. To cover his nervousness the fellow, whose name was Edgehill, affected a jocular familiarity which intensified rather than concealed what he was so anxious to hide.

"You're not looking quite up to the mark, Mr. Bruce," he said, when I was introduced to him; then, with a leer, he imitated a man pulling a cork and continued--

"Eyes bright, hands shaky--the old thing. I suppose?"

"I have been down with fever," I answered.

"Too much Pekin air," he replied. "This beastly country would make an Egyptian mummy turn up his toes. But never fear, keep your pecker up, and you'll pull through yet."

I thanked him for this assurance, and then turned to Nikola, who had seated himself in a long cane chair, and, with his finger-tips pressed together, was staring hard at him. Something seemed to have ruffled his feathers. When he spoke it was distinctly and very deliberately, as if he desired that every word he uttered should be accepted by the person to whom it was addressed at its full value.

"And so, Mr. Edgehill, after my repeated warnings you have informed your Chinese friends that you have a visitor?"

The man stepped back as if he had received a blow, his face flushed crimson and immediately afterwards became deathly pale. He put out his hand to the wall behind him as if for support; I also noticed that he drew such deep breaths that the glasses on the sideboard beside him rattled against each other.

"Your two Chinese friends," said Nikola slowly and distinctly, "must have placed a peculiar value upon the information with which you were able to furnish them if they were willing to pay so high a price for it."

The man tried to speak, but without success. All his bounce had departed; now he was only a poor trembling coward who could not withdraw his eyes from that calm but cruel face that seemed to be looking into his very heart.

Then Nikola's manner changed, and he sprang to his feet with sudden energy.

"You dog!" he cried, and the intensity of his tone cut like a knife. "You pitiful hound! So you thought you could play Judas with me, did you? How little you know Dr. Nikola after all. Now listen, and remember every word I say to you, for I shall only speak once. To-night, at my dictation, you will write a letter to your Chinese friends, and to-morrow morning at six o'clock you will saddle your horse and set off for Tientsin. Arriving there you will go to Mr. Williams, whose address you know, and will tell him that I have sent you. You will say that you are to remain in his house, as his prisoner, for one calendar month; and if you dare to communicate with one single person concerning me or my affairs during that or any other time, I'll have your throat cut within half an hour of your doing so. Can it be possible that you think so little of me as to dare to pit your wits against mine? You fool! When you get out of my sight go down on your knees, and thank Providence that I haven't killed you at once for your presumption. Do you remember Hanotat? You do? Well, then, take care my friend that I do not treat you as I did him. Like you he thought himself clever, but eventually he preferred to blow his brains out rather than fight me further. You have been warned, remember. Now go and prepare for your journey. I will communicate with Williams myself. If you are not in his house by breakfast time on Thursday morning it will save you expense, for you will never have the appetite for another meal."

Not a word did the man utter in reply, but left the room directly he was ordered, looking like a ghost.

When he had gone I turned to Nikola, for my astonishment exceeded all bounds, and said--

"How on earth did you know that he had given any information about us?"

In reply Nikola stooped and picked up from the floor two small stubs. On examination they proved to be the remains of two Chinese cigarettes. He then went across the room to a small curtained shelf, from which he produced a brandy bottle. Three glasses, all of which had been used, stood by the bottle, which was quite empty. Having pointed out these things to me he went back to his chair and sat down.

"Edgehill," he explained, "doesn't drink brandy, except when he has company; even then he takes very little. Before I left the house this evening to fetch you I took the precaution to look behind the curtain. That bottle was then more than three parts full, and I am quite certain that there were no ends of Chinese cigarettes upon the floor, because I looked about. Before that I had noticed that two men were watching the house from across the way. As I went down the street I picked up the end of a cigarette one of them had been smoking. There it is; you can compare them if you like. The man's manner when he let us in added another link to the chain of evidence, and his face, when I asked him the first question, told me the rest. Of course it was all guess-work; but I have not learned to read faces for nothing. At any rate you saw for yourself how true my accusation proved."

"But what do you think the man can have told them?" I asked. "And who could the people have been who questioned him?"

"He can't have told them very much," Nikola replied, "because there wasn't much to tell; but who the men could have been I am quite unable even to conjecture. I distrust them on principle, that's all."

"But why did you send him to Williams?"

"To keep him out of the way of further mischief until we have had a fair start; also because I wanted to teach him a lesson. I may have occasion to use him at some future date, and a little bit of discipline of this sort will do him no harm. But now let us change the subject. I have something else I want to talk to you about. First see that there is no one at the door, and then bring your chair nearer to mine."

I tip-toed over to the door. After I had reached it I waited for a moment and then opened it suddenly. There was no one outside, so I came back again and drew my chair nearer to Nikola. He had taken a letter from his pocket, and was evidently preparing to read it to me. Before he did so, however, he said in a low voice--

"This communication is from Prendergast. It was brought to me by special messenger at midday to-day. If you will give me your attention I will read it to you. It is dated from Tientsin, and runs as follows:--

"To **dr.** Nikola, pekin.

"Dear sir--I have to inform you that on Thursday week last I received a telegram from Mr. Williams of this place bidding me come to him at once in order to negotiate some important business on your behalf. I had hardly received your wire before Mr. Eastover called upon me to say that he was also in receipt of a telegram to the same effect. Understanding that no time must be lost, within two hours of receiving the messages, we were on board the steamer *James Monaghan*, en route for Tientsin.

"That place we reached in due course, and immediately reported our arrival to your agent, Mr. Williams, from whom we learned the nature of the work upon which we were to be employed. Its danger was quite apparent to us, and at first, I must confess, the difficulties that surrounded it struck me as insurmountable. The Chief Priest of the Hankow Temple is a well-known personage, and very popular. His private life may almost be said to be nil. He never moves out unless he has a troop of people about him, while to attempt to get at him in his own town would only be to bring a mob of howling devils round our ears and ruin the whole enterprise beyond redemption. I immediately placed myself in communication with Chung-Yein, who fortunately was in Hankow at the time. It was through his agency we discovered that the priest--who, as you know, has resigned his office in the temple--was in the act of setting out upon a long journey.

"As soon as I learned this I instructed Chung-Yein to endeavour to elicit the route. He did so, and informed me that the man proposed travelling by way of Hang-Chu and Fon-Ching to Tsan-Chu, thence up the Grand Canal by way of Tsing-Hai to Tientsin, whence it was said he was going to make his way on to Peking. I examined a chart of the country very carefully, and also conferred with Mr. Williams and Mr. Eastover, who both agreed with me that any action which might be necessary should be contrived and carried out at Tsan-Chu, which, as you know, is a town a little below the point where the canal, running to Nans-Shing, joins the Yun-Liang-Ho river.

"This settled, the next thing to be done was to endeavour to discover how the abduction of the priest could be effected.

To suit your purposes we saw that it must be arranged in such a fashion that no scandal could possibly ensue. He would have to be abducted in such a manner that his followers would suppose he had left them of his own accord. But how to do this was a problem very difficult to work out. The man is old and exceedingly suspicious. He has a reputation for trusting nobody, and he invariably acts up to it. Unless, therefore, we could invent some really plausible excuse he would be almost impossible to catch, and foreseeing this I again called in Chung-Yein to my assistance. At any cost, I told him, he must manage to get into the priest's service, and once there to begin to ingratiate himself with his master to the very best of his ability. The time was so short that we dared not wait to cultivate an opportunity, but had to work in our chances, as they rose, to suit ourselves.

"At great risk Chung-Yein managed to get himself appointed a member of the priest's travelling party. Once this was done his peculiar abilities soon brought him under his master's notice, and that end having been achieved the rest was easy.

"Within three days of his arrival the household was broken up, and the priest, with a numerous retinue, commenced his journey. By the time they had travelled a hundred miles Chung-Yein was on very familiar terms with him; he discovered many means of adding to the priest's comfort, and during the march he was so assiduous in his attentions that his master began to place more and more trust in him. When they reached Fon-Ching he was advanced to the post of secretary, and then the plot which I had arranged was ready to be put into execution.

"Little by little Chung-Yein dropped into his master's willing ears the news of a fortune which he assured him might be obtained with very little risk. The avaricious old man swallowed the bait only too readily, and when he had digested the letters which the astute Chung read him from time to time, and which were supposed to have been written by his cousin Quong-Ta, from Tsan-Chu, he was as good as caught.

"After eight days of continuous travelling the company arrived at the entrance to the canal. Eastover and I had left Tientsin by this time, and had travelled post haste down to meet them. Once they were fairly installed at the principal inn Chung-Yein came to see me. He had arranged everything most carefully, it appeared, even to the extent of having it circulated among his fellow-servants that after leaving Tsan-Chu the high priest intended dispensing with their services and going on alone. It now only remained for us to arrange a meeting with him, and to have some means prepared whereby we might convey him across country, over the forty odd miles that separated Tsan-Chu from Chi-Kau-Ho, to where a junk was already waiting to receive him. While Eastover undertook the arrangement of this part of the business I drew up the plan which was to give us possession of the priest's person.

"Chung-Yein was to represent to him that he was the unhappy possessor of a cousin who was a noted robber. By virtue of his evil habits he had accumulated great riches, but finding himself now likely to come within reach of the finger-tips of the law he was most anxious to purchase a friend who would stand by him in case of evil happening.

"The greedy old priest, intending to ask a large share of the plunder for the favour accorded, consented to bestow his patronage upon the youth, and when he was brought to understand that his share of the transaction would amount to something like six thousand taels, his anxiety to obtain possession of the coin became more and more intense. He discussed the matter with Chung-Yein times out of number, and finally it was decided that that night they should proceed together to a certain house in the village, where he should interview the culprit and also receive his share of the gains.

"As soon as I was made conversant with what had been arranged I pushed forward my plans, arranged with one of my own men to impersonate the cousin, and by the time dusk had fallen had everything in readiness. Relays of ponies were stationed at intervals along the road to the coast, and the skipper of the junk only waited to have his passenger aboard to weigh anchor and be off.

"At eight o'clock, almost to the minute, the priest, disguised, and accompanied by Chung-Yein, appeared at the door.

"They were admitted by the counterfeit cousin, who conducted them forthwith to the back of the house. Once in the room, negotiations were commenced, and the priest lost no time in severely reprimanding the young man for the evil life he had hitherto been leading. Then, that he might the better be able to understand what a nefarious career it had been, he demanded a glimpse of the profits that had accrued from it. They included a bag of dollars, a good selection of gold leaf, a quantity of English money, and a small bag of precious stones. All of these things had been prepared at considerable cost for his inspection.

"His old eyes twinkled greedily as they fell upon this goodly store, and his enthusiasm rose as each successive bag was

opened. When at last the contents of the bag of stones were spread out before him he forgot his priestly sanctity altogether in his delight and stooped to examine them. As he did so Chung-Yein sprang forward, and threw a noose over his head, a chloroformed sponge was clapped against his nose, while the spurious cousin pulled his heels from under him and threw him on his back upon the floor.

“The anaesthetic did its work well, and in a short time the old gentleman was in our power. Half an hour later he was safely tied up in a chair, and was being deported as fast as his bearers could conduct him to Chi-Kau-Ho.

“In the meantime Chung-Yein had returned to the inn, where he paid off the retinue and informed them that their master had received a sudden summons and had started up the canal for Tientsin alone. Then Eastover and myself mounted our ponies and followed the worthy priest to the sea.

“Chi-Kau-Ho, which, as you know, is a place of abject poverty, and is only visited by junks bringing millet from Tientsin to exchange for fish, was the very place for our purpose. Fortunately it was high tide, and for that reason we were able to get our burden on board the junk without very much difficulty. At other times it is impossible for a boat drawing any depth of water at all to come within seven miles of the village. The bar, as doubtless you are aware, renders this impossible.

“As soon as we had handed over the man to the skipper we returned to the shore. An hour later the vessel set sail, and by the time you receive this letter the Chief Priest of Hankow will in all probability be somewhere among the pirates of Along Bay. As his captors on board the junk have no respect for his creed, and he has no money upon his person to bribe them to set him ashore again, I think he will find it difficult to get back to the mainland. But to prevent anything of the sort occurring I have told the owner of the junk that if, on the 21st day of August, six months ahead, he conveys him to Michel Dugenne, who by that time will be in Formosa, he will receive £100 English in exchange for his person. I think this will suit your purpose.

“As to our own movements, they were as follows.

“Leaving Chi-Kau-Ho we chartered a junk and proceeded up the coast to Pea-Tang-Ho, thence making our way on pony back to Tientsin, at which place we arrived two days since. Chung-Yein I have rewarded with 2,000 dollars, and he is now on his way, as fast as he can travel, to Hong-Kong. He intends, I believe, to make for Singapore, where he will reside till all chance of trouble has blown over. I have taken the precaution to register his address in case we should require his services again. Should you desire to see either Mr. Eastover or myself, we will remain in Tientsin for a fortnight longer. After that Eastover purposes crossing to Japan, while I return to Hong-Kong, where I can always be heard of at the old address.

“Trusting that the manner in which we have conducted this dangerous affair will be to your satisfaction, I have the honour to subscribe myself, your obedient servant,

“William Prendergast.”

“Now,” said Nikola as he folded up this precious document, “the coast is clear, and for the future I intend to be the Chief Priest of Hankow. During the time you have been ill I have been making a number of important inquiries, and I think I know pretty well the kind of course I shall have to steer. To-morrow morning I intend that we shall enter the Llamaserai, where it will be imperative that we have all our wits about us. A change in our dress will also be necessary, particularly in mine. The priest is an old man, and I must resemble him as nearly as possible.”

“It will be a difficult character to support for so long. Do you think you are capable of it?”

He looked at me with one of his peculiar smiles.

“There was a time in my life,” he said, “when I used to be a little uncertain as to my powers; since then I have taught myself to believe that if a man makes up his mind there is nothing in this world he cannot do. Yes, I shall manage it. You need have no fear on that score.”

“I have no fear,” I answered truthfully. “I have the most implicit faith in you.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Nikola, “for you will want it all. Now let us retire to rest. At five o’clock we must begin to dress; at six I have to see that Edgehill starts for Tientsin.”

Without more ado we procured blankets and stretched ourselves upon the floor. In less than five minutes I was asleep, dreaming that I was helping the priest of Hankow to abduct Nikola from the Llamaserai, where he had gone to deposit the stick that Wetherell had given him.

When I woke, it was to hear horse-hoofs clattering out of the yard. It was broad daylight, and on looking about me I discovered that Nikola was not in the room. Presently he entered.

“Edgehill has departed,” he said, with a queer expression upon his face. “I have just seen him off. Somehow I think it will be a long day before he will attempt to play tricks with Dr. Nikola again.”



CHAPTER 25. THE LLAMASERAI

“Come,” said Nikola, when the last sounds of Edgehill’s departure had died away; “there is no time to lose; let us dress.”

I followed him into an adjoining room, which, though somewhat larger than that in which we had hitherto sat, was even more poorly furnished. Here a number of dresses lay about on chairs, and from these Nikola chose two.

“The first thing to be considered,” he said, as he seated himself on a chair and looked at me, “is that we have to change the form of our disguises in almost every particular. I have been thinking the matter most carefully out, and, as I said just now, we are going to be entirely different men. I shall be the Priest of Hankow, you will be his secretary. Here are your things; I should advise you to dress as quickly as you possibly can.”

I took him at his word, and appropriating the garments he assigned to me, returned with them to the front room. At the end of a quarter of an hour I was no longer an Englishman. My dress was of the richest silk, figured and embroidered in every conceivable fashion, my shoulders were enclosed in a grey cloak of the finest texture, my pigtail was of extraordinary length and thickness, while my sandals and hat were of the most fashionable make. If my rank had been estimated by the gorgeousness of my attire and the value of the material, I might have been a Taotai of a small province, or secretary to some metropolitan dignitary. When I had dressed myself I sat down and waited for Nikola to make his appearance.

A short while later a tall gaunt Chinaman, certainly fifty years of age, upon the chin of whose weather-beaten countenance an ill-trimmed beard was beginning to show itself, came into the room, accompanied by a smaller man much bent with age. I was resolved not to be hoodwinked this time, so I said in Chinese to the man who entered first, and who I estimated was nearer Nikola’s size:

“You’ve not been long in getting ready.”

“It would be folly to be slow,” he answered; “we have much to do,” and then without another word led the way down the passage towards the rear of the house. Arriving at the yard we discovered a perfect cavalcade drawn up. There were several led ponies, half a dozen mounted men, and about twice that number of hangers on.

“One word,” I said, drawing Nikola, as I thought, on one side. “What part am I to play in this pageant?”

“Is there not some little mistake?” the man said. “For whom do you take me?”

“For my master,” I answered.

“Then I’m afraid you have chosen the wrong man,” he returned. “If you want Dr. Nikola, there he is mounting that pony yonder.”

I could hardly believe my eyes. The second man resembled Nikola in no possible particular. He was old, thin, and nearly bent double. His face was wrinkled into a hundred lines, and his eyes were much sunken, as also were his cheeks. If this were Nikola he might have gone through the whole length and breadth of China without any fear of his identity being for one moment questioned. I went across to him, and, scarcely believing what I had been told, addressed him as follows:

“If you are Nikola,” I said--“and I can hardly credit it--I want you to give me my instructions.”

“You don’t recognize me then?” he whispered. “I’m glad of that; I wanted to try you. I thought to myself, if he does not find me out it is scarcely likely that any one else will. Your own disguise is most excellent; I congratulate you upon it. With regard to your position, you are of course supposed to be my secretary. But I will give you a few points as we proceed. Now let us be starting.”

“But first, who is the man whom I mistook for you?”

“He is a fellow for whom I sent to Tientsin while you were ill; and as I have taken some trouble to ensure his fidelity you need have no fear of his betraying us. He will only accompany us as far as the Llamaserai, and then, having posed as chief of my retinue, he will leave us and return to the coast. Now mount your animal and let us start.”

I went back to my pony, and when I was in the saddle we filed slowly out of the gateway, down the crowded street and through the gates towards the Yung-Ho-Kung, or the great Llama temple. This enormous building, which has the reputation of being one of the most inaccessible places in China to Europeans, is located on the outskirts of the city, nearly five miles from the quarter in which Edgehill’s house was situated.

Remembering its sinister reputation, you may imagine my sensations as we rode up to the first great gate. I could not help wondering what the Fates had in store for us inside. For all I knew to the contrary I might be destined never to see the world outside the walls again. It was not a cheering thought, and I tried to divert my attention from it by looking about me.

Strangely enough the first two gates were by no means hard to pass, but at the third the real difficulty began.

It was shut in our faces, and though we knew our coming had been observed by those inside, not a sign of any living soul presented itself. An awe-inspiring silence reigned in the great building, and for some time our servants hammered upon the door in vain. Then a shaven head appeared at a small grille and inquired our business.

Whether the answer he received was satisfactory or not I could not say, but seeing that it did not unbar the gate, Nikola rode forward and, leaning over in his saddle, said something in a low voice. The effect was magical: the doors flew open instantly. Then a man came forward and assisted Nikola to alight. He signed to me to do the same, and I accordingly dismounted beside him. As I did so a servant approached him and, greeting him with the utmost reverence, never daring to raise his eyes to his face, said something which I could not hear. When he had got through with it Nikola turned to me, and bade me pay off the men. I did so, and they immediately returned to the city by the way they had come. Then turning to the monk who was still waiting, Nikola said, pointing to me:

"This is my secretary. He is necessary to my well-being, so I beg that he may be allowed to enter with me." The monk nodded, and then the gate being opened wide we passed through it. Once inside we ascended, by means of a long flight of stone steps, to a courtyard, round which were a number of small stone rooms not unlike cells. In the centre stood an enormous wooden statue of Buddha which riveted the attention at once; the figure was at least seventy feet high, was covered with all sorts of beautiful ornamentation, and held an enormous flower resembling a lotus in either hand. On its head was a gold crown, and in each section of the latter I could discern a smaller image, reproducing the large one in every particular.

Above the cells, just described, were a series of long galleries, which were reached by stairs from the courtyard, and above them again rose roof after roof and tower after tower. From this terrace, if one may so call it, we passed on to another, the approach to which was guarded by two magnificent bronze lions. Making our way through many temples, each decorated with Chinese hangings, to say nothing of ornaments in gold, silver, ivory, bronze and enamel, we came at last to one where we were requested to wait while our guide, who was evidently a person in authority, went off in search of the High Priest.

For nearly twenty minutes we remained alone together. The place was eerie in the extreme. The wind, entering by the windows on either side, rustled the long silken hangings; there was an intolerable odour of joss-sticks; and, as if this were not enough, we had the pleasure of knowing that we were only impostors, dependent upon our wits for our lives. If but one suspicion entered the minds of those we were deceiving, we might consider ourselves as good as dead men. In such an enormous building, unvisited by foreigners, and owning hardly any allegiance--if indeed such a feeble reed could help us--to the Emperor of China, the news of our death would excite no concern, and we would be as completely lost as the bubble which rises majestically from a child's pipe, only to burst unnoticed in mid-air.

As I watched the morning light playing among the hangings and listened to the booming of a gong which came to us from some distant part of the building, I could not help thinking of the sweet girl to whom I had plighted my troth, and who at that very moment might also be thinking of me and wondering how I fared. That I did not deserve such consideration on her part was only too certain, for surely never in the history of the world had a man embarked upon a more foolish undertaking. Columbus in his lonely little ship ploughing its way across the unknown ocean in search of a continent, the existence of which at times *he* must almost have doubted himself, was not one whit less desperate than we were at that moment. Franklin amid the ice, unconscious whether another week might not find his vessel ground to powder between the ice floes, and himself floating in the icy water, was not one tittle nearer death than we were while we waited for an audience with the father abbot of this most awesome monastery.

At the end of the twenty minutes my ears--which of late had been preternaturally sharp--detected the pattering of sandalled feet upon the stone staircase at the further end of the room. Next moment three figures appeared, two of whom were leading a third between them. The supporters were men in the prime of life. The third must have been at least eighty years of age. One glance was sufficient to show me that he was not a pure Mongol, but had probably Thibetan blood in his veins. Both he and his monks were attired in the usual coarse dress of the Buddhist priests, their heads being as destitute

of hair as a billiard ball.

Having brought the old fellow down to the bottom of the stairs, the young men left him there, and returned up the steps again. Then it was that we made the discovery that, besides being old and infirm, the High Priest of the Llamaserai was nearly blind. He stood perfectly still for a moment after he had entered, a queer trembling figure, dressed in dingy yellow. Finally, with hands outstretched, he came towards where we stood.

"I beg you to tell me," he said, "who you are, and how it comes about that you thus crave our hospitality?"

He put the question in a high tremulous voice, more like a woman's than a man's.

"I am the Priest of the Temple of Hankow," said Nikola gravely. "And I am here for reasons that are best known to those who called me."

"If it is as you say, how shall I know you?"

"Is the moon no longer aware that there are little stars?" asked Nikola, speaking with a perfection of accent that no Chinaman living could have excelled.

"Yea, but the dawn makes all equal," replied the old man. "But if you be he whom we have expected these last three weeks, there are other means whereby you can assure us of the truth of what you say."

Nikola slipped his right hand inside his long outer jacket and drew from his pocket the tiny stick he had obtained from Wetherell, and handed it to the old man. No sooner had he received it, and run his fingers over the quaint Chinese characters engraved upon it, than the old fellow's demeanour changed entirely. Dropping upon his knees he kissed the hem of Nikola's dress.

"It is sufficient. I am satisfied that my lord is one of the Masters of Life and Death. If my lord will be pleased to follow his servant, accommodation shall be found for him."

As he spoke he fumbled his way towards the staircase by which he had entered the room. Nikola signed to me to follow, and in single file we made our way to the room above. As we went I could not help noticing the solidity of the building. The place might have withstood a siege with the greatest ease, for the walls were in many cases two feet, and in not a few nearly three feet thick.

The stairs conducted us to a long passage, on either side of which were small rooms or cubicles. Leaving these behind us, we approached another flight of steps which led to the highest floor of the building. At the end of a long corridor was a small ante-chamber hung round with dark coloured silks, just as we had seen hi the great hall below. From this we entered another nearly twice the size, which was lighted with three narrow windows. From one of these, I afterwards discovered, a good view of the city of Pekin was obtainable.

As soon as we were safely inside, the High Priest assured us, in a quavering voice, that everything we might find in his humble dwelling was at our disposal, and that we might consider his rooms our home during our stay in the monastery. Then, with another expression of his deep respect, he left us, presumably to see that some sort of meal was prepared for us. As soon as the sound of his steps had died away Nikola leaped to his feet.

"So far so good," he cried. "He does not suspect us you see. We have played our parts to perfection. Tomorrow, if I can only get him into the proper frame of mind, I'll have the rest of the information I want out of him before he can turn round."

For the rest of that day we amused ourselves perambulating the building, walking slowly with dejected bearings whenever we met any of the monks, greeting the various shrines with deepest reverences, prostrating ourselves at the altars, and in every way, so far as lay in our power, creating the impression that, in the practices of our faith, we were without our equals. At five o'clock we participated in the usual evening service held in the great hall, and for the first time saw the monks assembled together. A more disreputable crew, I can unhesitatingly assert, I had never seen before. They were of all ages and of all ranks, but, so far as I could tell, there was not a face amongst them that did not suggest the fact that its owner was steeped to the eyebrows in sensuality and crime. Taken altogether, I very much doubt if, for general blackguardism, their equal could have been found in the length and breadth of Asia. Also I could not help speculating as to what sort of a chance we should stand if our secret should happen to be discovered, and we were compelled to run the gauntlet of the inmates. The service was not a long one, and in something under half an hour we were back in our rooms again. Then Nikola was summoned to an interview with the High Priest, and, while he was away, I wandered downstairs and strolled about the courtyards.

It was the time of the evening meal, and those monks who had already dined, were lolling about smoking, and gossiping over the affairs of the day. What they thought of my presence there I could not tell, but from one or two remarks I heard it struck me that I was not regarded with any too much favour.

At the end of one of the courtyards, that in fact in which we had noticed the large statue of Buddha, there was a well, and round the coping were seated quite a dozen men. Their quaintly coloured garments, their shaven heads and their curiously constructed pipes, backed by the rosy glow of the sunset, constituted a most picturesque and effective group. I crossed towards them, and bowing to the party, seated myself in a place which had just been vacated.

One of those present was an accomplished story-teller, and was in the middle of a lengthy narrative bristling with gods, devils, virtuous men, and reverend ancestors, when I sat down to listen. After he had finished I applauded vigorously, and being desirous of ingratiating myself with the company, called for silence and commenced a tale myself. Fortunately it was received with considerable favour, but I could not help noticing that my success was not very palatable to the previous narrator. He had been watching me ever since I joined the circle, and it struck me as I proceeded with my story that his interest increased. Then, like a flash, the knowledge dawned upon me that I had seen him before. As I remembered the circumstance a cold sweat of fear burst out upon me, my voice shook under my emotion, and in trying to think what I had better do, I lost the thread of my narrative. I saw my listeners look up in surprise, and an expression of malignant satisfaction came into my rival's face. Instantly I pulled myself together and tried to continue as if nothing out of the common had occurred. But it was too late; I had aroused suspicion, and for some reason or another the men had come to the conclusion that all was not right. How bitterly I regretted having joined the circle at all I need not say! But it was no use crying over spilt milk, so after awhile I made an excuse and left them to their own devices, returning to the rooms set apart for the use of Dr. Nikola and myself. Fortunately he was alone. Not knowing, however, who might be about, I did not address him at once, but sat down near the door and waited for him to speak. He very soon did so.

"I have been wanting you," he said rather sharply. "What have you been doing this hour past?"

"Wandering about the building," I answered, "and at the same time discovering something which is the very reverse of pleasant."

"What do you mean," he asked, his eyes--for he had removed his spectacles--glittering like those of a snake.

"I mean that there is a man in this monastery whom I have met before," I said, "and under very unpleasant circumstances."

"Do you think he recognizes you?"

"I hope not," I answered; "but I fear he does."

"Where did you meet him, and why do you say 'unpleasant'?"

"It was in Canton," I answered, "and this fellow tried to break into my house. But I caught him in time, and in the fight that followed he stabbed me in the wrist. I carry the mark to this day. Look at it for yourself. He would have been executed for it had not the magistrate before whom he was brought possessed a personal grudge against me and allowed him to escape."

"Let me look at the mark," said Nikola.

I gave him my left hand, pulling up my sleeve as I did so, that he might have a better view of it. Half way across, a little above the wrist bone, was a long white scar. Nikola gazed at it attentively.

"This is serious," he said. "You will have to be very careful, or that man will carry his news to the High Priest, and then we shall be nicely caught. For the future make it your habit to walk with your hands folded beneath your sleeves, and take care who you let come up beside you."

"I will remember," I answered, and as I spoke the great gongs, calling the monks to the last service of the day, boomed out from the courtyard below. Being determined not to show ourselves lacking in religious zeal we descended to the large hall, which we found already filled with worshippers. Nikola, by virtue of his sanctity, took up his place in a prominent position, hard by where sat the High Priest himself. I was near the western wall, surrounded by a set of the most loathsome and blackguardly ruffians it would be possible to imagine. At first I took but little notice of them, but when a new monk came up and pushed his way in alongside me my suspicions were aroused. It was not long before they were confirmed; the man next to me was the fellow who had looked at me in such a curious fashion when we were seated round the well, and about whom I had spoken to Nikola only a few minutes before. But even if he recognized me he did not allow a sign to

escape him to show that he did. Throughout the service he occupied himself completely with his devotions, turned his face neither to the right hand nor to the left, and it was not until we were about to rise from our knees that he came out in his true colours. Then, just as I was half on to my feet, he stumbled against me with such violence that I fell back again and rolled over on to the floor. Then like lightning he sprang forward, seized me by the arm, and tearing back my sleeve looked at the scar upon my wrist. As he did so he allowed a little cry of triumph to escape him. For a moment I lay where I had fallen, too confused and horror-stricken at what had happened to say or do anything, and yet I knew that unless I acted promptly we were ruined indeed.

By this time the hall was more than half empty. I could see Nikola standing at the further end talking earnestly to the High Priest. To interrupt him would be akin to sacrilege; so after I had risen, and when the man had left me and hurried out after the others, I stood at a little distance and waited for him to notice me. As soon as he looked my way I placed three fingers of my right hand upon my forehead, a sign we had agreed to use whenever danger threatened us and it was necessary to act quickly. He saw my meaning, and a moment later, making some excuse, bade the High Priest good-night, and signing to me to follow him, retired to his dormitory.

As soon as we had reached it he turned sharply upon me, his eyes, in his excitement, blazing in his head like live coals.

"What further news have you to tell me?" he asked. "Only that I am discovered," I answered. "While we were at prayers downstairs the man whom I suspected this evening pushed himself in next to me. I took the precaution to keep my hands covered with my sleeves lest he should see the scar he had inflicted. I could not move away from him for obvious reasons, and when the service was over I flattered myself that I had outwitted him. But he was as sharp as I, and just as I was rising from my knees he lurched against me and pushed me down upon the floor. Naturally I put up my hands to save myself, and as I did so he seized upon my wrist."

For some minutes Nikola did not speak. He walked up and down the room like a caged tiger.

"This will put us in a nasty fix," he said at last; "and one mistake at this juncture will ruin everything. He will, of course, go direct to the High Priest in order to reveal his discovery, then that worthy will come to me, and I shall be compelled to produce you. You will be found to be an Englishman, disguised, and as soon as that is discovered we'll see the gleaming of the knives. This has come at a most unfortunate time, for by to-morrow morning, if all had gone well, I should have got the information I wanted, have been told the word that would admit us to the monastery in the mountains, and we could have left this place in safety. However, there is no time to waste talking of what might have been. I must work out some scheme that will save us, and at once. You had better go into the inner apartment and leave me alone."

As he spoke I detected the sound of footsteps on the stairs. I ran into the inner room and drew the heavy curtain across the door. A moment later the High Priest, accompanied by two or three of the principal monks and the man who had discovered me, entered the room. Looking through a hole in the curtain I saw that Nikola had dropped upon his knees and was occupied with his devotions. On observing this the High Priest and his satellites came to a dead stop. Nikola was in no hurry, but kept them waiting for at least ten minutes. Then he rose and turned towards them.

"What does this mean?" he asked sternly; "and how is it that this rabble intrudes upon my privacy? Begone all of you!"

He waved his arm, and the men departed, but none too pleasantly;

"Now, my father," he said to the High Priest, who had watched these proceedings with no small amount of surprise, "what is it that you require of me?"

"Nay, my lord," said the man he addressed, "be not angry with thy servants. There is without doubt some mistake, which will soon be made clear. I have come to thee because it has been asserted by a young priest that he, whom you call your secretary, is not a Chinaman at all, but a certain barbarian Englishman, called by the heathen name of 'Bruce.' I cannot believe that this is so. How long has my lord known the man?"

"It is unseemly that I should be questioned in this fashion," began Nikola angrily. "If the man were what thou sayest, what matter is it to thee or to any one? Yet, lest it breed mischief, I will answer. What thy servant says is false. The man is as true a countryman of thine as the Emperor himself. There is malice in this accusation, and it shall be sifted to the dregs. Let us decide the matter in this way. If it should be as thou sayest, then to-morrow morning I will have the dog out, and he shall answer for his duplicity with his barbarian life. If not, then, I will tear the tongue of that lying knave, thy priest, out of his mouth. To-night I have to offer many prayers, and I am weary, so let it be decided between us in the great hall to-morrow morning."

“It shall be as you say,” said the old man. “Do not let there be hard words between us, my lord. Have no fear; if the man be all thou sayest my servant shall surely pay the penalty.”

Having said this he bowed himself before Nikola, and then departed from the room. As soon as the sound of his footsteps had ceased upon the stone stairs Nikola came in to me.

“They have gone,” he said. “And now we have got to find a way out of this difficulty.”

“It would seem impossible,” I answered doubtfully.

“Nothing is impossible,” Nikola answered. “I hate the word. We’ve got at least six hours before us in which to do something, and if we want to save our lives we had better look sharp and decide what that something is to be.”



CHAPTER 26. AN EXCITING NIGHT IN THE LLAMASERAI

“**T**here are two points which we must hold in constant remembrance,” said Nikola. “The first is that you are *not* a Chinaman, and the other is that if you go before the High Priest to-morrow morning and pose as one, he’ll certainly find you out, and then we shall be ruined completely. If you run away I had better run too, for all the good I can get by stopping, but that I am resolved not to do. It has cost me many years’ labour, to say nothing of some thousands of British sovereigns, to get as far as I have in this business, and come what may I am determined not to turn back.”

“But in what way are we to get out of the difficulty?” I asked dejectedly. “If I can’t come before them and brazen the matter out, and I can’t remain away for fear of confirming what they already suspect, and I can’t leave the monastery without drawing down suspicion on you, I must confess I don’t see what *is* to be done. I suppose we couldn’t bribe the man to withdraw his charge?”

“Not to be thought of,” said Nikola, with conviction. “Our lives would then be simply dependent on his reading of the term ‘good faith.’ You ought to know what sort of trust we could place in that.”

“Could we force him to clear out, and thus let it be supposed that he had brought a false accusation against me, and was afraid to stay and face the consequences?”

“That is not possible either,” said Nikola. “He would want to bargain with us, and, to be revenged on us, would turn traitor when we refused his demand. In that case it would be ‘pull devil, pull baker,’ and the one who could pull the longest would gain the day. No, you had better leave the situation to me. Let me tackle it, and see what *is* to be done.”

I did as he wished, and for nearly half an hour could hear him pacing up and down his room. I did not intrude upon him, or interrupt him in any way. At the end of the time stated he abandoned his sentry-go and came in to me.

“I think I see my way,” he said. “But when all is said and done it is almost as desperate as either of the other remedies we thought of. You will have to carry it out, and if you fail--well, Heaven have mercy upon both of us. You have saved my life before, I am going to trust it to you now; but remember this, if you do not carry out my plan exactly as I wish, you will never see me alive again. Give me your best attention, and endeavour to recollect everything I tell you. It is now close on midnight; the gong for early service will sound at half-past five, but it will be daylight an hour before that. By hook or by crook I must get you out of this place within a quarter of an hour, and, even if you have to steal a horse to do it, you must be in Pekin before half-past one. Once there you will find the house of Yoo Laoyeh, who lives at the rear of Legation Street, near the chief gate of the Tartar city.”

“But how am I going to get into the city at all?” I asked, amazed that he should have forgotten what struck me as a most hopeless barrier--the wall. “The gates are closed at sundown and are not opened again till sunrise.”

“You’ll have to climb the wall,” he answered.

“But, as you know very well, that’s altogether impossible,” I said.

“Not a bit of it,” he replied. “I will tell you of a place where it is quite practicable. Do you remember the spot where you proposed to Miss Medwin?”

“Perfectly,” I answered with a smile. “But how do you know it?”

“My dear fellow, I was within a hundred yards of you the whole time. No, you need not look at me like that. I was not spying upon you. After the fashion of the great Napoleon, I like to be prepared for every emergency, and, thinking I might some day want to get into the city when the gates were shut, I utilized some spare time by taking a look at the wall. You see how useful that chance visit has proved. Well, two bastions from where you were seated that day the stones are larger and more uneven than anywhere else along the whole of that side of the city. To my certain knowledge three men have been in the habit of climbing that portion of the ramparts for the last three years, between midnight and sunrise, smuggling in goods to the city in order to avoid paying the octroi duty, which, as you know, is levied during daylight. When you have got over you will find a sentry posted on the other side; to him you will pay three taels, telling him at the same time that you intend returning in an hour, and that you will pay him the same amount for the privilege of getting out. Having passed the sentry you will proceed into the town, find Yoo Laoyeh, and let him know the fix we are in. You may promise him the sum

of £100 cash if he falls in with your suggestions, and you must bring him back with you, willy-nilly, as fast as you can travel. I will meet you at the southern gate. Knock four times, and as you knock, cough. That shall be the signal, and as soon as I hear it I will open the gate. All that must be guarded against inside shall be my care. Everything outside must be yours. Now let us come along, and discover by what means I can get you out."

Together we left the room, descended the stairs, and, crossing the ante-chamber, entered the big hall. The wind which, as I have already said, came in through the narrow windows on either side rustled the long hangings till the place seemed peopled with a thousand silk-clad ghosts. Nikola crossed it swiftly and left by the southern door. I followed close at his heels, and together we passed unobserved through the great courtyard, keeping well in the shadow of the building until we reached the first gate. Fortunately for us this also was unguarded, but we could hear the monk, who was supposed to be watching it, placidly snoring in the room beside it. Slipping the enormous bar aside we opened it quietly, passed through, and, crossing an open strip of green, made for the outer wall. Just, however, as we were about to turn the corner that separated us from it, a sudden sound of voices caused us to hesitate.

"This way," whispered Nikola, seizing my wrist and dragging me to the left. "I can find you another exit. I noticed, yesterday, a big tree growing by the side of the wall."

Leaving the centre gate we turned to our left hand, as I have said, and followed the wall we desired to surmount until we arrived at a large tree whose higher branches more than overspread it.

"This is the very place for our purpose," said Nikola, coming to a halt. "You will have to climb the tree and crawl along the branches until you get on to the wall, then you must let yourself down on the other side and be off to the city as hard as you can go. Good-bye, and may good luck go with you!"

I shook him by the hand and sprang into the branches. Hitherto it had seemed as if I had been acting all this in a wonderfully vivid dream. Now, however, the rough bark of the tree roused me to the reality of my position. I climbed until I came to the level of the wall, then, choosing a thick branch, made my way along it until I stood upon the solid masonry. Once there, only a drop of about twelve feet remained between me and freedom. Bidding Nikola, who was watching me, good-bye, in a whisper, I leant over the wall as far as I was able, grasped the coping with both hands, and then let myself drop.

Once on the ground I ran across the open space towards a cluster of small dwellings. In an enclosure adjoining one of them I could dimly make out a number of ponies running loose, and knowing that if I could only secure one of these and find a saddle and bridle in the residence of its owner, I might be in Pekin in under an hour, I resolved to make the attempt.

Creeping up to the nearest of the houses, I approached the door. Inside I could hear the stertorous breathing of the occupants. A joss-stick burnt before an image near at hand, and though it was well-nigh exhausted by the time I secured it, it still gave me sufficient light to look about me. A moment later I had a saddle and bridle down from a peg and was out among the ponies again.

Securing the most likely animal I saddled him, and as soon as I had done so, mounted and set off towards Pekin as fast as he could take me. The night was dark, but the track was plain; the little beast was more than willing, and as I did not spare him, something less than three-quarters of an hour, counting from the time I had bidden Nikola good-bye, found me dismounting under the great wall of the city.

Having found a convenient spot, I tied up my pony, and when he was made secure set to work and hunted along the wall until I came to the scaling place of which Nikola had told me.

As I reached it a light wind blew from over the plain, and sent the dust eddying about me, otherwise not a sound disturbed the stillness of the night. Then, having made sure that I was unobserved, and that I had chosen the right spot, I began to climb. It was no easy task. The stones were large and uneven. Sometimes I got a good hold, but in many cases I had veritably to cling by my nails. The strain was almost too much for my strength, and when I had been climbing for five minutes, and there still remained as much of the wall ahead, I began to despair of ever getting to the top. But I was not to be beaten; and remembering how much depended upon my getting into the city, I dragged myself wearily on, and at last crawled on to the summit. When I reached it I could see the city spread out on the other side. A little to the left of where I stood was the place, to be for ever sacred in my eyes, where I had proposed to, and been accepted by, my sweetheart, while away to the right was that quarter of the town where at that moment she was in all probability asleep, and, I hoped, dreaming of me. As soon as, I recovered my breath I crossed the wall and descended by the steps on the other side.

I had scarcely reached the bottom before a man rose from a dark corner and confronted me. In the half light I could see that he was a Chinese soldier armed with a long spear. Telling him in a whisper, in answer to his inquiry, that I was a friend, I pressed the money that Nikola had given me for that purpose into his not unwilling hand, and as soon as he drew back, astonished at my munificence, sped past him and darted down the nearest street.

From the place where I had passed the sentry to the thoroughfare where Yoo Laoyeh resided was a distance of about half a mile, and to reach it quickly it was necessary that I should pass the Benfleets' abode. You may imagine what thoughts occupied my brain as I stood in the silent street and regarded it. Under that roof was sleeping the one woman who was all the world to me. I would have given anything I possessed for five minutes' conversation with her; but as that was impossible I turned on my heel and made my way through a by-lane into the street I had been sent to find. The house was not a big one, and at first glance did not strike me very favourably. But the style of building did not matter if I found there the man I wanted. I knocked upon the door--which I discovered was heavily barred--but for some minutes got no response; then, just as I was beginning to wonder in what way I could best manage to attract the attention of those inside, I heard a patter of bare feet on the stone passage, and after much fumbling the door was opened and a man appeared before me. One glance told me that he was not the person I wanted. I inquired if Yoo Laoyeh were at home, but from the answer I received I gathered that he had gone out earlier in the evening, and that he was probably at a neighbouring house playing *fan-tan*.

Having asked the man if he would take me to him, and at the same time offering him a considerable bribe to do so, I was immediately conducted into the street again, down one by-lane, up another, and finally brought to a standstill before one of the largest houses in that quarter. My guide was evidently well known, for when the door was opened the keeper did not attempt to bar our passage, but permitted us to pass through to a fair-sized room at the back. Here quite thirty Chinamen were busily engaged upon their favourite pastime, but though we scanned the rows of faces, the man for whom we were searching was not among the number. As soon as we were convinced of this fact we left that room and proceeded to another, where the same game was also being carried on. Once more, however, we were doomed to disappointment; Laoyeh was not there either.

Being anxious to obtain some news of him my guide interrogated one of the players, who remembered having seen our man about an hour before. He imagined he had then gone into the room we had first visited. We returned there and made further inquiries, only to elicit the fact that he had been seen to leave the house about half an hour before our arrival.

"Have no fear. I will find him for you," said my companion, and we thereupon proceeded down the passage, past the doorkeeper, into the street again. Once more we took up the chase, trying first one house and then another, to bring up eventually in an opium den a little behind the English Legation. The outer room, or that nearest the street, was filled with customers, but our man was not among them. The inner room was not quite so crowded, and here, after all our searching, we discovered the man we wanted. But there was this drawback, he had smoked his usual number of pipes and was now fast asleep.

By this time it was hard upon two o'clock, and at most I dared not remain in the city more than another hour. At the same time it would be a most foolish, if not dangerous, proceeding to attempt to travel with my man in his present condition. If he did nothing else he would probably fall over the wall and break his neck, and then I should either have to leave him behind or remain to answer inconvenient questions; but whatever happened I knew I must carry him out of this house as quickly as possible to some place where I could endeavour to bring him back to his senses. I said as much to the man who had found him for me, and then between us we got him on to his feet, and taking him by either arm led him off to his home. By the time we got him there he had in a small measure recovered from the effects of his smoke. Then we set to work, using every means known to our experience, to bring him round, and by half-past two had so far succeeded as to warrant me in thinking I might set off on my return journey.

"But what does your Excellency require of me?" asked Laoyeh, who was still a bit mystified, though fortunately not so far gone as to be unable to recognize me.

"You are to come with me," I answered, taking good care before I spoke that the other man was well out of hearing, "to the Llamaserai, where Nikola wants you. There is a hundred pounds English to be earned; how, I will tell you as we go."

As soon as he heard Nikola's name and the amount of the reward, he seemed to become himself again. We accordingly left the house and set off together for that part of the wall where I had made my descent into the city. The same soldier was still on guard, and when I had placed the money I had promised him in his hand, he immediately allowed us to pass.

Within twenty minutes of leaving Yoo's house we were ready to descend the other side of the wall.

If I had found it difficult to ascend, I discovered that it was doubly difficult to descend. The night was now very dark, and it was well-nigh impossible to see what we were doing. The cracks and crannies which were to serve as resting-places for our feet seemed almost impossible to find, and right glad I was when the business was accomplished and we stood together on *terra firma* at the bottom.

So far my visit to the city had proved eminently successful. But time was slipping by, and there was still the long distance out to the Serai to be overcome. I went over to where the pony stood hitched to the tree, exactly as I had left him, and placed my companion upon his back. He was almost, if not quite, himself now, so urging the little animal into a canter we set off, he riding and I running beside him. In this fashion, running and walking, we came to the southern gate of the great monastery. I had carried out my share of the business, and when once I should have got Laoyeh inside, the direction of the remainder would lie with Nikola.

Having turned the pony loose, his bridle and saddle upon his back, I approached and knocked upon the door, coughing softly as I did so. Then little by little it opened, and we found Nikola standing upon the threshold. He beckoned to us to enter, and without losing a moment we did as we were ordered. Daylight was close at hand, and the unmistakable chill of dawn was in the air. It was very certain that I had returned none too soon.

Having passed through the gate, and fastened it behind us, we made for the second archway on our left. The sentry box--if one might call it by that name--was still deserted, and the guard was snoring as placidly in his little room at the side as when we had crept through nearly four hours before. This courtyard, like its predecessor, was empty; but to show the narrowness of our escape, I may say that as we crossed it we could distinctly hear the jabbering of priests in the dormitories on either hand.

At last we reached the door of the big hall. Opening it carefully we sped across the floor and then up the stairs to our own apartments. Once inside, the door was quickly shut, and we were safe. Then Nikola turned to me, and said--

"Bruce, you have saved me a second time, and I can only say, as I said before, you will not find me ungrateful. But there is no time to lose. Yoo Laoyeh, come in here."

We passed into the inner room, and then Nikola opened a small box he had brought with his other impedimenta. Then bidding the man seat himself upon the floor, he set to work with wonderful dexterity to change his appearance. The operation lasted about a quarter of an hour, and when it was completed Nikola turned to me.

"Change clothes with him, Bruce, as quickly as you can."

When this was done I could hardly believe my own eyes, the likeness was so wonderful. There, standing before me, was an exact reproduction of myself. In height, build, dress, and even in feature, the resemblance was most striking. But Nikola was not satisfied.

"You must be changed too," he said. "We must do the thing thoroughly, or not at all. Sit down."

I did so, and he once more set to work. By the time I left his hands I was as unlike my real self as a man could well be. No one could have recognized me, and in that case it was most unlikely that our secret would be discovered.

On the way from Peking I had clearly explained to Laoyeh the part he would be called upon to play. Now Nikola gave the final touches to his education, and then all was completed.

"But, look here," I cried, as a thought struck me; "we have forgotten one thing--the scar upon my arm."

"I had omitted that," said Nikola. "And it is just those little bits of forgetfulness that hang people."

Then taking a long strip of native cloth from a chair he constructed a sling, which he placed round my neck. My left arm was placed in rough splints, which he procured from his invaluable medicine chest, and after it had been bandaged I felt I might also defy detection, as far as my wrist was concerned.

Half an hour later the great gong sounded for morning worship, and in a few moments we knew that the courtyards and halls would be filled with men. Acting under Nikola's instructions I descended to the hall alone, and choosing my opportunity slipped in and mingled with the throng. I was not the only cripple, for there were half a dozen others with their arms in slings. Nor was the fact that I was a stranger likely to attract any undue attention, inasmuch as there were mendicants and people of all sorts and descriptions passing into the Serai directly the gates were opened at daylight.

I had not been in the hall very long before I saw Nikola hobble in on his stick and take his place beside the High Priest.

Then the service commenced. When it was at an end it was evident that something unusual was going to take place, for the monks and their guests remained where they were, instead of leaving the hall as usual. Then the High Priest mounted the small platform at the further end and seated himself in the chair of justice. Nikola followed and took his place beside him, and presently two tall monks appeared bringing with them the man who had brought the accusation against me on the previous evening. He seemed pretty certain of being able to prove his case, and I could not help smiling as I watched his confident air. First the old High Priest, who it must be remembered was almost blind with age, addressed him. He said something in reply, and then Nikola spoke. His voice was scarcely as loud as usual, yet every word rang across the hall.

"Liar and traitor!" he said. "You have brought this charge against my faithful servant for some devilish reason of your own. But old as I am I will meet it, and evil be upon you if it be proved that what you say is false."

He then turned to a monk standing beside him and said something to him; the man bowed, and leaving the platform disappeared in the direction of our staircase. Presently he returned with Laoyeh, whose head was bent, and whose hands were folded across his breast. He climbed the steps, and, when he had done so, accuser and accused confronted each other from either end of the platform.

Then it was that I saw the cleverness of Nikola's scheme. He had arranged that the trial should take place after the morning service for the reason that, at that tune, the big hall would not be thoroughly lighted. As it proved, it was still wrapped in more than semi-darkness, and by the promptness with which he commenced business it was evident that he was resolved to dispose of the matter in hand before it would be possible for any one to see too clearly.

First the man who brought the accusation against me was ordered to repeat his tale. In reply he gave a detailed description of our meeting in Canton and led up, with a few unimportant reservations, to the stab he had given me upon the wrist. He then unhesitatingly asserted the fact that I was a *kueidzu*, or foreign devil, and dared the man who was taking my place to disprove it. When he had finished, Nikola turned to the High Priest and said--

"My father, thou hast heard all that this wicked man hath said. He accuses my servant yonder--he himself being a thief and a would-be murderer by his own confession--of being one of those barbarians whom we all hate and despise. I have found my man faithful and true in all his dealings, yet if he is a foreign devil, as this fellow asserts, then he shall be punished. On the other hand, if this rogue shall be proved to be in the wrong, and to have lied for the sake of gain, then it shall be my request to thee that I be allowed to deal with him according to the powers with which thou knowest I am invested. I have no fear; judge therefore between us."

When he had finished the old man rose and hobbled forward on his stick; he looked steadfastly from one to the other of the two men, and then, addressing Laoyeh, said--

"Come thou with me"; and took him into a small room leading out of the big hall.

For nearly half an hour we sat in silence, wondering what the upshot of it all would be. I watched Nikola, who sat during the whole of the time with his chin resting on his hand, staring straight before him.

At last our period of waiting was at an end. We heard the tapping of the High Priest's stick upon the floor, and presently he ascended the platform again. Laoyeh followed him. Reaching his chair the old man signed for silence, and as soon as he had obtained it, said--

"I have examined this man, and can swear that the charge this fellow has brought against him is without truth in every particular. Let justice be done."

Then facing Nikola he continued--

"The rogue yonder waits for thee to do with him as thou wilt."

Nikola rose slowly from his chair and faced the unhappy man.

"Now, dog!" he cried. "By the words of thine own High Priest I have to deal with thee. Is it for this that thou earnest into the world. Thou hast dared to malign this my servant, and thy superior has sworn to it. Draw nearer to me."

The man approached a few paces, and it was easily seen that he was afraid. Then for nearly a minute Nikola gazed fixedly at him, and I cannot remember ever to have seen those terrible eyes look so fierce. If you can imagine a rabbit fascinated by a serpent you will have some notion of how the man faced his persecutor. Slowly, inch by inch, Nikola raised his right hand until it pointed to a spot on the wall a little above the other's head. Then it began to descend again, and as it did so the fellow's head went down also until he stood almost in a stooping posture.

"You see," said Nikola, "you are in my power. You cannot move unless I bid you do so."

"I cannot move," echoed the man almost unconsciously.

"Try how you will, you cannot stand upright," said Nikola.

"I cannot stand upright," repeated the man in the same monotonous voice, and as he spoke I saw large drops of perspiration fall from his face upon the floor. You may be sure that every eye in that large hall was riveted upon them, and even the High Priest craned forward in his chair in order that he might not lose a word.

"Look into my face," said Nikola, and his words cut the air like a sharp knife.

The man lifted his eyes and did as he was ordered, but without raising his head.

"Now leave this place," said Nikola, "and until this time to-morrow you cannot stand upright like your fellow-men. It is my command, and you cannot disobey. Let that help you to remember that for the future my servants must be sacred. Go!"

He pointed with his right hand to the doors at the end of the hall, and, bent double, the man went down the aisle between the rows of gaping monks out into the courtyard and the streaming sunshine. The High Priest had risen to his feet, and calling up a monk who stood beside him, said--

"Follow him, and be certain that he leaves the Serai."

Then approaching Nikola he said--

"My master, I see that, without a doubt, thou art he whom we were told to expect. In what way can thy servant prove of service to thee?"

"Grant me an interview and I will tell you," said Nikola.

"If my lord will follow me," said the old man, "we can talk in private." Next moment they disappeared into the room where the High Priest had conducted the examination of Laoyeh. Thereupon the congregation dispersed.

As soon as the hall was empty I seized my opportunity and went upstairs to our own apartment. There I discovered Laoyeh. According to Nikola's instructions we changed clothes again, and when he was himself once more, I gave him the peddler's dress which Nikola had prepared for this occasion, and also the reward which had been promised him. Then bidding him good-bye, I bade him get out of the monastery as quickly as he could.

It was nearly an hour before Nikola joined me. When he did he could hardly conceal his exultation.

"Bruce," he said, almost forgetting his usual caution in the excitement of the moment, "I have discovered everything! I have got the chart, and I have learnt the password. I know where the monastery is, and at daybreak to-morrow morning we'll set out in search of it."



CHAPTER 27. EN ROUTE TO THIBET

D aylight was scarcely born in the sky next morning before Nikola roused me from my slumbers.

"Wake up," he said; "for in half an hour we must be starting. I have already given orders for the ponies to be saddled, and as we have a long stage before us we must not keep them waiting."

Within a quarter of an hour of his calling me I was dressed and ready. A breakfast of rice was served to us by one of the monks, and when we had eaten it we descended to the great hall. The High Priest was waiting there for us, and after a short conversation with Nikola he led us down the steps into the courtyard, where, beneath the shadow of the great statue of Buddha, we took an impressive farewell of him.

Having thanked him for his hospitality, we made our way towards the outer gate, to find our ponies and servants standing ready to receive us. The gate was thrown open, and in single file we proceeded through it. Then it clanged to behind us, and when it had done so we had said good-bye to the Great Llamaserai.

During the first day's ride nothing occurred worth chronicling. We reached a small village at mid-day, camped there, and after a brief rest, continued our journey, arriving at the fortified town of Ho-Yang-Lo just as dusk was falling. Having been directed to the principal inn, we rode up to it, and engaged rooms for the night. Our first day's stage had been one of thirty-six miles, and we felt that we had well earned a rest.

It was not until the evening meal was eaten, and Nikola and I had retired to our own private room, that I found an opportunity of asking what he thought of the success which had attended our efforts so far.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I must confess that I am surprised that we have been as successful as we have."

"Well, that man's recognizing me was unfortunate, I admit; but still----"

"Oh, I don't mean that at all," said Nikola. "I regard that as quite an outside chance. And after all it proved a golden opportunity in the end. What does surprise me, however, is that I should have been accepted so blindly for the Priest of Hankow."

"That is certainly strange," I answered. "But there is one thing which astonishes me even more: that is, how it comes about that, as the stick was being searched for by the Chinese in Australia who knew of your intentions, it should fail to be evident to the society in China that you are the man who stole it?"

"My dear fellow," said Nikola, laying his hand upon my arm, "you don't surely imagine that in such a business as the present, in which I have sunk, well, if nothing else, your £10,000, I should have left anything to chance. No, Bruce. Chance and Dr. Nikola do not often act in concert. When I obtained that stick from Wetherell I took care that the fact should not be known outside the circle of a few men whom I felt perfectly certain I could trust. As soon as it was in my possession I offered a large reward for it in Sydney, and I took care that the news of this reward should reach the ears of the Chinamen who were on the look-out for it. Then, on the plea that I was still searching for it, I returned to China, with what result you know. What does puzzle me, however, is the fact that the society has not yet found out that it has been deceived. It must eventually come to this conclusion, and it can't be very long before it does. Let us hope that by that time we shall be back in civilization once more."

I knocked the ashes out of my pipe, and rolling over on my blankets, looked Nikola straight in the face.

"By the time you have got to the end of this business," I said, "your information, presuming all the time that you *do* get it, will have cost you close on £40,000--very possibly more; you will have endangered your own life, to say nothing of mine, and have run the risk of torture and all other sorts of horrors. Do you think it is worth it?"

"My dear Bruce, I would risk twice as much to attain my ends. If I did not think it worth it I should not have embarked upon it at all. You little know the value of my quest. With the knowledge I shall gain I shall revolutionize the whole science of medicine. There will be only one doctor in the world, and he will be Dr. Nikola! Think of that. If I desired fame, what greater reputation could I have. If money, there is wealth untold in this scheme for me. If I wish to benefit my fellow-man, how can I do it better than by unravelling the tangled skein of Life and Death? It is also plain that you have not grasped my character yet. I tell you this, if it became necessary for me, for a purpose I had in view, to find and kill a certain fly, I would follow that fly into the utmost parts of Asia, and spend all I possessed in the world upon the chase; but one thing is very

certain, *I would kill that fly*. How much more then in a matter which is as important as life itself to me?"

As I looked at him I had to confess to myself that I had not the least doubt but that he would do all he said.

"There is a proverb," continued Nikola, "to the effect that 'Whatever is worth doing, is worth doing well.' That has been my motto through life, and I hope I shall continue to live up to it. But time is getting on; let us turn in; we have a long day's ride before us to-morrow."

We blew out the light and composed ourselves for the night, but it was hours before sleep visited my eyelids. Thoughts on almost every conceivable subject passed in and out of my brain. One moment I was in the playing-fields of my old familiar English school; the next I was *ratching* round the Horn in an ice-bound clipper, with a scurvy-ridden crew in the fore-castle, and a trio of drunken miscreants upon the quarter-deck; the next I was in the southern seas, some tropic island abeam, able to hear the thunder of the surf upon the reef, and to see palm-clad hill on palm-clad hill rearing their lovely heads up to the azure sky. Then my thoughts came back to China, and as a natural sequence, to Peking. I enacted again that half-hour on the wall, and seemed once more to feel the pressure of a certain tiny hand in mine, and to see those frank sweet eyes gazing into my face with all the love and trust imaginable. Gladys was my promised wife, and here I lay on the road to Thibet, disguised as a Chinaman, in a filthy native inn, in the company of a man who would stop at nothing and who was feared by everybody who knew him. It was long past midnight before I fell asleep, and then it seemed as if my eyes had not been closed five minutes before Nikola, who, as usual, appeared to require no sleep at all, was up and preparing to go on; indeed, the sun was hardly risen above the horizon before our breakfast was dispatched, and we were ready for the saddle.

Prior to starting Nikola went off to speak to the man who kept the inn. While he was away I amused myself by riding round to look at the other side of the house. It was of the ordinary Chinese pattern, not much dirtier and not much cleaner. A broad verandah surrounded it on two sides, and at the rear was a sort of narrow terrace, on which, as I turned the corner, two men were standing. As soon as they saw me they were for retreating into the house, but before they were able to accomplish this manoeuvre I had had a good look at them.

The taller of the pair I had never seen before, but his companion's face was somehow familiar to me. While I was wondering where I had encountered it, a *niafoo* came round the building to inform me that Nikola was ready to be off, so touching up my pony I returned to the front to find the cavalcade in the act of starting.

As usual Nikola took the lead, I followed him at a respectful distance, and the servants were behind me again. In this fashion we made our way down the track and across a stream towards the range of mountains that could just be discerned on the northern horizon. All round us the country was bare and uncultivated, with here and there a mud-hut, in colour not unlike the plain upon which it stood.

By midday we had reached the range of mountains just mentioned, and were following a well-made track through gloomy but somewhat picturesque scenery. With the exception of a few camel teams laden with coal passing down to Peking, and here and there a travelling hawker, we met but few people. In this region the villages are far apart, and do not bear any too good a reputation.

That night we camped at an inn on the mountain top, and next morning made our descent into the valley on the other side. By the time darkness fell we had proceeded some thirty odd miles along it. The country was quickly changing, becoming more and more rocky, and the ascents and descents more precipitous. For this reason, at the next halting-place we were compelled to part with our ponies, and to purchase in their stead half a dozen tiny, but exceedingly muscular, donkeys.

On the third night after our entry into the hills and the fourth from Peking, we halted at a small monastery standing in an exposed position on the hill top. As we rode up to it the sun was declining behind the mountains to the westward. There was no need for any password, as we were invited to enter almost before we had knocked upon the gate. The place was occupied by an abbot and six priests, all of whom were devotees of Shamanism. The building itself was but a poor one, consisting of an outer court, a draughty central hall, and four small rooms adjoining it. At the entrance to the central hall we were received by the abbot, a villainously dirty little fellow of middle age, who conducted us to the rooms we were to occupy. They were small and mean, very much out of repair, and, as a result, exceedingly draughty. But if a view, such as would be found in few parts of the world, could compensate for physical discomfort, we should have been able to consider ourselves domiciled in luxury. From one window we could look across the range of mountains, over valley and peak, into

the very eye of the setting sun. From another we could gaze down, nearly three hundred feet, sheer drop, into the valley, and perceive the track we had followed that morning, winding its way along, while, through a narrow gully to our left we could distinguish the stretch of plain, nearly fifty miles distant, where we had camped two nights before.

As the sun dropped, a chilly wind sprang up and tore round the building, screaming through the cracks and crevices with a noise that might have been likened to the shrieks of a thousand souls in torment. The flame of the peculiar lamp with which our room was furnished rose and fell in unison with the blasts, throwing the strangest shadows upon the walls and ceiling. This eccentric light, combined with the stealthy movements of the coarse-robed, shaven monks, as they passed and repassed our door, did not, as may be expected, conduce to our cheerfulness, so that it may not be a matter for surprise that when I sat down with Nikola to our evening meal, it was with a greater feeling of loneliness, and a greater amount of home-sickness in my heart, than I had felt at all since the journey commenced.

When our repast was finished we lit our pipes and sat smoking for half an hour. Then, being unable to stand the silence of the room any longer--for Nikola had a fit of the blues, and was consequently but a poor companion--I left our side of the house and went out into the courtyard before the central hall. Just as I reached it a loud knocking sounded upon the outer gate. On hearing it two of the monks crossed the yard to open it, and, when they had swung the heavy doors back, a small party of men, mounted on donkeys, rode into the square. Thinking the arrival of a party of travellers would at least serve to distract my thoughts, I went down to watch them unload.

As I approached them I discovered that they were five in party, the principals numbering three, the remaining two being coolies. Their profession I was unable to guess; they were all armed, and, as far as I could tell, carried no merchandise with them. When they had dismounted the abbot came down to receive them, and after a little talk conducted them to the guest chambers on the other side of the hall opposite to our quarters.

For some time after the leaders had retired to their rooms I remained where I was, watching the coolies unharness; then, just as the last pack-saddle was placed upon the ground, one of the owners left the house and approached the group. He had come within a few paces of where I stood before he became aware of my presence; then he stooped, and, as if to excuse his visit, opened the pack-saddle lying nearest him. I noticed that he did not take anything from it, and that all the time he was examining it he did not once turn his face in my direction; therefore, when he wheeled quickly round and hurried back to the house, without speaking to either of his men, I felt that I had every right to suppose he did not wish me to become aware of his identity.

This set me thinking, and the more I thought the more desirous I became of finding out who my gentleman might be. I waited in the courtyard for nearly a quarter of an hour after the animals had been picketed, and the pack-saddles and harness had been carried away, but he did not put in another appearance. Seeing this, I returned to the buildings, and set my brain to work to try and discover what I wanted so much to know. It was a long time before I could hit on any plan; then an idea came to me and I left the room again and went round to the back of the buildings, hoping, if possible, to find a window through which I could look in upon the new arrivals as they sat at supper; but it was easier, I discovered, to talk of such a window than actually to find it.

The back of the monastery was built flush with the edge of the cliff, the rampart wall joining the building at the angle of our room. If only, therefore, I could manage to pass along the wall, and thus reach a small window which I guessed must look out on to a tiny court, situated between the rearmost wall of the central hall and that on the left of our room, I thought I might discover what I wanted to know. But to do this would necessitate a long and dangerous climb in the dark, which I was not at all anxious to attempt until I had satisfied myself that there was no other way of obtaining the information I required.

It might very well be asked here why I was so anxious to convince myself as to the man's identity. But one instant's reflection will show that in such a situation as ours we could not afford to run a single risk. The man had allowed me to see that he did not wish me to become aware of his personality. That in itself was sufficient to excite my suspicion and to warrant my taking any steps to satisfy myself that he was not likely to prove an enemy. As I have said before, we were carrying our lives in our hands, and one little precaution neglected might ruin all.

Before venturing on the climb just mentioned, I determined to go round to the other side of the house and endeavour to look in through one of the windows there. I did so, and was relieved to find that by putting my hands on the rough stone window-sills, and bracing my feet against a buttress in the angle of the wall, I could raise myself sufficiently to catch a

glimpse of the room.

I accordingly pulled myself up and looked in, but, to my astonishment and chagrin, there were only two people present, and neither of them was the man I wanted.

I lowered myself to the ground again and listened, hoping to hear the sound of a third person entering the room, but though I remained there nearly twenty minutes I could not distinguish what I wanted. That the man was a member of the same party I was perfectly convinced, but why was he not with them now? This absence on his part only increased my suspicion and made me the more anxious to catch a glimpse of him.

Seating myself on the stone steps of the central hall, I roughly traced in my own mind a ground plan of the building, as far as I was familiar with it. The central hall was, of course, empty; we occupied the rooms on the right of it, the second party those on the left; of these their coolies had the front room, while the two men I have just referred to had taken possession of the rearmost one. A moment's reasoning convinced me that there must be a third, which did not look out on the open courtyard, but must have its window in the small court, formed by the angles of the wall at the rear. If, therefore, I wanted to look into it I must undertake the climb I had first projected, and, what was more, must set about it immediately, for if I did not do so his lamp would in all probability be extinguished, and in that case I might as well spare myself the trouble and the danger.

I returned to my own side of the house, and, having convinced myself that there was no one about, mounted the wall a little to the right of where I had been standing when I heard the men knock upon the gate.

If you would estimate the difficulty and danger of what I was about to attempt, you must remember that the wall at the top was scarcely more than eighteen inches wide. On one hand it had the buildings for support, the side of which rose above my head for more than a dozen feet, and permitted no sort of hold on its smooth surface, while, on the other hand, I had a sheer drop into the valley below, a fall of fully three hundred feet.

At the summit of the mountain the wind was blowing a perfect hurricane, but so long as I was behind the building I was not subjected to its full pressure; when, however, I arrived at the courtyard, where I could see the light of the window I was so anxious to reach, it was as much as I could do to keep my footing. Clinging to everything that could offer a support, and never venturing a step till I was certain that it was safe, I descended from the wall, approached the window, and looked in. This time I was not destined to be disappointed. The man I wanted was lying upon a bed-place in the corner, smoking a long pipe.

His face was turned towards me, and directly I looked at it I remembered where I had seen him. He was one of the principal, and, at the same time, one of the most interested members of the society who had visited the house to which we had been conducted by Laohwan, in Shanghai.

As I realized this fact a cold sweat came over me. This was the same man whom we had seen at the rest-house two nights before. Was he following us? That he had recognized me, in spite of my disguise, I felt certain. If so, in whose employ was he, and what was his object? I remained watching him for upwards of an hour, hoping some one would come in, and that I should overhear something that would tell me how to act. Then, just as I was about to turn away, deeming it useless to wait any longer, the taller of the pair I had seen in the other room entered and sat down.

"Success has attended us. At last we have laid our hands on them," said the new-comer. "They do not suspect, and by to-morrow evening we shall meet Quong Yan Miun at the ford, tell him all, and then our part of the work will be at an end."

"But we must have the stick, come what may," said the man upon the bed. "It would be death for us to go back to Peking without it."

"We shall receive much honour if we capture it," chuckled the other. "And then these foreign devils will suffer torture till they die."

"A lesson to them not to defy the Great Ones of the Mountains," returned his friend. "I wish that we could be there to see it!"

"It is said that they have many new ways of torture, of which we cannot even dream, up there in the mountains," continued the first man. "Why may we not go forward to see what befalls them?"

"Because we could not enter even if we did go on," returned the man I had recognized; "nor for myself do I want to. But these foreign devils have stolen the password and imitated the Priest of Hankow, and if it had not been for Laoyeh, who liked Chinese gold better than foreign devils' secrets, and so betrayed them, we should never have found them out at

all.”

Then with significant emphasis he added--

“But they will die for it, and their fate will be a warning to any who shall come after them. And now tell me, where do we meet Quong Yan Miun?”

“At the crossing of the river in the mountains, at sundown to-morrow evening.”

“And is it certain that we shall know him? There may be many crossing.”

“He will be riding a camel, and sitting upon a red saddle embroidered with silver. Moreover, it is said that he has but one eye, and that his left hand, which was cut off by the mandarin Li, is still nailed to the gateway at I-chang.”

“Does he expect our coming?”

“By no means. Once in every month he is sent down by the Great Ones of the Mountains to receive messages and alms from the outside world. Our instructions are not to tarry until this letter be delivered into his hands.”

As he spoke he took from his pocket a small roll of paper carefully tied up. Having replaced it, he turned again to his companion.

“Now leave me,” he said. “I am tired, and would sleep. To-morrow there be great doings on hand.”

The second man left the room, and next moment the lamp was extinguished.

As soon as all was dark I crept softly across the yard, mounted the wall--not without a tremor, as I thought of what my fate would be if I should overbalance, and retraced my steps round the house. Once safely in the courtyard I made all the haste I could back to my room.

I fully expected to find Nikola asleep; my surprise, therefore, may be imagined when I discovered him seated on the floor working out Euclid’s forty-third problem with a piece of charcoal upon the stones. He looked up as I entered, and, without moving a muscle of his face, said quietly:

“What have you discovered?”

I seated myself beside him and furnished him with a complete *resume* of what I had overheard that evening.

When I had finished he sat looking at the wall. I could see, however, that he was thinking deeply. Then he changed his position, and with his piece of charcoal began to draw figure eights inside each other upon the floor. By the time the smallest was the size of a halfpenny he had arrived at a conclusion.

“It is evident that we are in a tight place,” he said coolly, “and if I were to sacrifice you here I could probably save myself and go forward with nothing to fear. It’s a funny thing that I should think so much of a man as to be willing to save his life at the expense of my own, but in this case I intend doing so. You have no desire to be tortured, I presume?”

“I have a well-founded objection to it,” I said.

“In that case we must hit upon some scheme which will enable us to avert such a catastrophe. If these fellows arrive at the ford before us they will have the first chance of doing business with the messenger. Our endeavour must be to get there before they do, and yet to send them back to Peking satisfied that they have fulfilled their mission. How to do this is the problem we have to work out.”

“But how *are* we to do it?” I inquired.

“Let me think for a few minutes,” he answered, “and I’ll see if I can find out.”

I waited for fully five minutes. Then Nikola said:

“The problem resolves itself into this. By hook or crook we must delay this man and his party on the road for at least three hours. Then one of us must go on to the ford and meet the man from the monastery. To him must be handed the letter I received from the High Priest at the Llamaserai, and when he has been sent back with it to his superiors there must be another man, accoutred exactly like himself, to take his place. This man, who will have to be myself, will receive our friends, take their letters and dispatch them back to Peking with a message that their warning shall be attended to. After that it will be touch-and-go with us. But I’m not afraid to go forward, and I pay you the compliment of saying that I don’t believe you are!”

“Well, upon my word, Dr. Nikola,” I answered candidly, quite carried away by the boldness of his scheme, “of all the men I’ve ever met you’re the coolest, and since you take it in this way I will go on with you and carry it through if it costs me my life.”

"I thank you," said Nikola quietly. "I thought I wasn't deceived in you. Now we must arrange the manner in which these different schemes are to be worked. To begin with, we must leave here at least an hour before our friends in the other rooms. Once on the way I must push forward as fast as I can go in order to secure a camel and saddle of the kind described. Then we have got to discover some means of delaying them upon the road. How can that be accomplished?"

"Couldn't we induce the villagers along the path to rise against them?"

"It would cost too much; and then there would be the chance of their turning traitor, like our friend Laoyeh. No; we must think of something else."

He recommenced drawing eights upon the floor. By the time he had perfected the thirtieth--for I counted them--he had worked it out to his satisfaction.

"By twelve o'clock to-morrow at the very latest," he said, "that is, if my information be correct, we ought to be at an inn in the mountains twenty miles from here. It is the only dwelling between this place and the ford, and they must perforce call at it. I shall instruct one of my men, whom I will leave behind for that purpose, to see that their animals are watered at a certain trough. If they drink what I give him to pour in, they will go about five miles and then drop. If they don't drink I shall see that he brings about another result."

"If you can depend on him, that should do the trick. But what about Laoyeh?"

"I shall deal with him myself," said Nikola with grim earnestness; "and when I've done I think he will regret having been so imprudent as to break faith with me."

He said no more, but I could not help entertaining a feeling of satisfaction that I was not the man in question. From what I have seen of Nikola's character, I can say that I would rather quarrel with any other half dozen people in the world, whoever they might be, than risk his displeasure.

"Now," I said, when he had finished, "as they've turned in we shouldn't be long in following their example."

"But before we do so," he answered, "I think you had better find the coolies and see that they thoroughly understand that we start at three o'clock. Moreover, bid them hold their tongues."

I complied with his request, and half an hour later was wrapped in my blankets and fast asleep.



CHAPTER 28. THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS

At ten minutes to three I was out of bed, fully dressed and prepared for the start. Nikola had roused the coolies before calling me, and they were already busy with their preparations. At three precisely a bowl of rice was brought to us by one of the monks, and by a quarter past we were on our donkeys in the courtyard ready to be off.

So far the only person aroused, in addition to our own party, was the monk who cooked our breakfast; him Nikola largely rewarded, and, in return for his generosity, the gates were opened without disturbing the household. We filed out and picked our way down the rocky path into the valley. Arriving at the bottom we continued our journey, ascending and descending according to the nature of the path. Every hour the country was growing more and more mountainous, and by midday we could plainly discern snow upon the highest peaks.

At half-past twelve we reached the inn where it had been decided that one of our retinue should be left behind to hocus the animals of our pursuers. For this work we had chosen a man whom we had the best of reasons for being able to trust. A sufficient excuse was invented to satisfy his scruples, and when we said good-bye to him it was with instructions to follow us as soon as he had done the work and could discover a convenient opportunity. That the man would do his best to accomplish his errand, we had not the slightest doubt, for the reward promised him was large enough to obviate the necessity of his doing any more work as long as he should live. Therefore when we left the inn, after baiting our animals for a short time, it was to feel comparatively certain that the success of our scheme was assured.

As soon as the caravansera was hidden by the corner of the mountain Nikola called me up to him.

"In a few moments," he said, "I am going to push forward to a village which I am told lies off the track a few miles to the northward. I hear that they have camels for sale there, and it will be hard if I cannot purchase one, and with it a silver-plated red saddle, before dusk. You must continue your journey to the ford, where you will in all probability find the messenger awaiting you. Give him this letter from the High Priest of the Llamaserai, warning the Great *Ones* of the Mountains of my coming, and bestow upon him this tip." Here he handed me a number of gold pieces. "After that be sure to hasten his departure as much as you can, for we must run no risk of his meeting those who are behind us. I turn off here, so press forward yourself with all speed, and good luck go with you."

"But when I have dispatched the messenger back to the monastery, what am I to do?"

"Wait till he is out of sight and then follow in his track for about half a mile. Having done so, find a convenient spot, camp and wait for me. Do you understand?"

I answered that I understood perfectly. Then ordering one coolie to follow him, with a wave of his hand, he turned off the track and in less than five minutes was lost to my sight. For nearly three hours I rode on, turning over and over in my mind the plan I had arranged for conducting the interview that lay before me. The chief point I had to remember was that I was a courier from the Society, sent from Peking to warn the monastery that one of the Great Three was approaching. Upon my success in carrying out this mission would very much depend the reception accorded to Nikola, therefore the story I was about to tell must necessarily be plausible in every particular.

By five o'clock, and just as the sun was sinking behind the highest peaks, the valley began to widen out, and the track became more plain. I followed it along at a medium pace, and then, having turned a corner, saw the smooth waters of the river before me.

As I did so I felt a cold chill pass over me; the success of our expedition seemed to rest upon my shoulders, to depend upon my presence of mind and the plausibility of my tale. If by any chance the man should suspect that I was not all I pretended to be, he might decide to wait, and then, with the help of such men as he might have with him, would detain me a prisoner. In that case, those behind us would catch us up, and I should be proved to be an impostor. Then, if I were not killed upon the spot, I should find myself carried on to the monastery, to become a subject for those experiments in torture, of which I had heard mention made the previous night.

When I reached it I discovered that the river at this particular ford was about eighty yards in width and scarcely more than two feet in depth. On either bank rose precipitous cliffs, reaching, even in the lowest places, to more than two hundred feet. To the right, that is, facing the north, the channel flowed between solid granite walls, but where I stood it had

evenly sloping banks. I rode to the water's edge, and, seeing no one on the other side, dismounted from my donkey and seated myself upon the sand. I was relieved to find that there were no pilgrims about; but I became more anxious when I saw that the man whom I was to meet had not yet put in an appearance. If he delayed his arrival for very long I should be placed in a nasty position, for in that case our pursuers would come up, discover me, and then I should be hopelessly lost.

But I need not have worried myself, for I had not long to wait. Within half an hour of my arrival at the ford a man mounted on a camel, rode out of the defile on the other side and approached the water's edge. He was tall, was dressed in some light-brown material, rode a well-bred camel, and when he turned round I could see that his saddle was red and ornamented with silver. Calling my men together I bade them wait for me where they were, and then, taking my donkey by the head, rode him into the stream.

So small was the animal that the water was well above the saddle flaps when I reached the deepest part. But in spite of much snorting and endeavours to turn back I persuaded him to go on, and we finally reached the other side in safety. The messenger from the monastery had dismounted from his camel by this time, and was pacing up and down the shore. As I came closer to him I saw that he had but one arm, and that one of his eyes was missing.

Dismounting from my donkey on the bank, I approached him, at the same time bowing low.

"I was told that I should find here a messenger from the Great Ones of the Mountains," I said. "Are you he whom I seek?"

"From whom come you?" he asked, answering my question by asking another.

"I come from the High Priest of the Llamaserai at Pekin," I answered, "and I am the bearer of important tidings. I was told that I should find a man here who would carry forward the letter I bring, without a moment's delay."

"Let me see the letter," said the man. "If it is sealed with the right seal I will do what you ask, not otherwise."

I gave him the letter and he turned it over and over, scrutinizing it carefully.

"This is the High Priest's seal," he said at last, "and I am satisfied; but I cannot return at once, as it is my duty to remain here until dusk has fallen."

"Of that I am quite aware," I answered. "But you will see that this is a special case, and to meet it I am to pay you this gold, that is provided you will go forward and warn those from whom you come of my master's approach."

When I had given him the bribe he counted it carefully and deposited it in his pocket.

"I will remain until the shadows fall," he said "and if no pilgrims have arrived by that time I will set off."

Having arranged it in this fashion, we seated ourselves on the sandy beach, and after we had lit our pipes, smoked stolidly for half an hour. During that time my feelings were not to be envied. I did not enjoy my smoke, for I was being tortured on the rack of suspense. For aught I knew our man might have failed in drugging the ponies of the pursuing party. In that case they would probably suspect us of an attempt to outwit them, and might put in an appearance at any moment.

The sun sank lower and lower behind the hill, till finally he disappeared altogether. Long shadows fell from the cliffs across the water, the evening wind sprang up and moaned among the rocks, but still there was no sign of any cavalcade upon the opposite bank. If only our rivals did not put in an appearance for another quarter of an hour we should be saved.

In addition to this suspense I had another anxiety. Supposing Nikola had not succeeded in obtaining an animal and saddle of the kind he wanted, and should be prevented from reaching the ford in time to receive the men he was expecting, what would happen then? But I would not let my mind dwell upon such a contingency. And yet for most positive reasons I dared not attempt to hurry the messenger, who was still sitting stolidly smoking. To let him think that I was anxious to get rid of him would only be to excite his suspicions, and, those once aroused, he would in all probability determine to remain at the ford. In that case I might as well walk into the river and drown myself without further waste of time.

One by one the stars came out and began to twinkle in the cloudless heavens, such stars as one never sees anywhere save in the East. The wind was rising, and in another half hour it would be too dark to see.

At last my companion rose and shook himself.

"I see no pilgrims," he said, "and it is cold by the water. I shall depart. Is it your pleasure to come with me or will you remain?"

"I have no will," I answered. "I must perforce wait here till the caravan bringing my master arrives. Then I shall follow you. Do not wait for me."

He did not need to be bidden twice, but approaching his camel, mounted, and then with a curt nod to me set off up the path.

As soon as he had disappeared I walked down to the water's edge and called to my men to come over, which they did. When they had landed, I bade them follow me, and, forsaking the ford, we set off at a brisk pace up the path.

A hundred yards from the river the track we were following turned abruptly to the right hand and wound through a narrow gorge. This, however, we did not enter, as I deemed it wisest to settle in a sheltered spot on the left. I rode ahead, and reconnoitred, and having ascertained that it could not be seen from the path, bade them pitch our camp there. Within ten minutes of our arrival the donkeys were picketed, the tents erected, and the camp fires lighted. Then, leaving the men to the preparation of the evening meal, I returned to the track and hurried along it in the direction of the ford.

When I was within fifty yards of the turning, which I knew would bring me within full sight of the river, I heard a low whistle. Next moment a man mounted on a camel came into view, and pulled up alongside me. In spite of the half dark I could see that the rider was dressed exactly like the man to whom I had talked at the ford; he had also one arm, and his right eye was closed.

"Bear to your left hand," he said, leaning down from his camel to speak to me; "there you will find some big rocks, and behind them you must hide yourself. Have your revolver ready to your hand, and if anything should happen, and I should call to you for assistance, come to me at once."

"Did you have much difficulty in procuring your camel?" I asked, hardly able to believe that the man was Nikola.

"None whatever," he answered; "but the clothes and saddle were a little more difficult. However, I got them at last, and now do you think I look at all like the man I am here to represent?"

"One or two things are different," I replied; "but you need have no fear; they'll not suspect."

"Let us hope not," said Nikola. "Where are the men?"

"Camped back yonder," I answered, "in a little gully to the left of the gorge."

"That's well; now creep down to the rocks and take your place. But sure not to forget what I have told you."

I made my way down as he ordered and little by little crept along to where three big boulders stood out upon the sands. Between these I settled myself, and to my delight found I had an almost uninterrupted view of the ford. As I looked across the water I made out a small party coming down the slope on to the sand on the other side. Without losing time they plunged in, and so quiet was the night I could even hear the splashing made by the animals and distinguish between the first noise on the bank, and the sullen thud as they advanced into deeper water. Then I heard a hoarse call, and a moment later Nikola rode across the sand on his camel.

In two or three minutes the fording party had reached the bank, scarcely more than ten paces from where I lay. So close were they indeed that I could hear the breathing of the tired animals quite distinctly and the sigh of relief with which they hailed the dismounting of their masters. The man who was in command approached Nikola and, after a little preamble, said:

"We were delayed on the road by the sickness of our animals, or we should have been here earlier. Tell us, we pray, if any other travellers have passed this way?"

"But one party," said the spurious messenger with a chuckle; "and by this time they are lost among the mountains. They grudged me alms and I did not tell them the true path. Ere this time to-morrow the vultures will have torn the flesh from their bones."

"How many in number were they?" asked the man who had first spoken.

"Five," answered Nikola; "and may the devils of the mountains take possession of them! And now who be ye?"

"We have come from Pekin," answered the spokesman of the party, "and we bring letters from the High Priest of the Llamaserai to the Great Ones of the Mountains. There be two barbarians who have stolen their way into our society, murdered him who was to be one of the Three, and substituted themselves in his place. The symbol of the Three, which was stolen by a foreign devil many years ago, is in their possession; and that was the party who passed this ford on their way to the mountains, and whom thou sawest."

"They will go no farther," said Nikola, when they had finished, with another grim laugh; "and the hearts that would know our secrets will be tit-bits for the young eagles. What is it that ye want of me?"

"There is this letter of warning to be carried forward," said the man; and as he spoke he produced from his pocket the roll of paper I had seen in his possession the previous night. He handed it to Nikola, who placed it inside his wadded coat, and then proceeded towards his camel, which he mounted. When it had risen to its feet he turned to the small party who were watching him, and said:

"Turn back on your path. Camp not near the ford, for the spirits of the lost pass up and down in the still hours of the night, and it is death for those who hear them."

His warning was not without effect, for as soon as he had ridden off I noticed with considerable satisfaction that the party lost no time in retracing their steps across the river. I watched them for some time, and only when they were dimly outlined against the stars on the brow of the hill did I move. Then, knowing that they must be making haste to be out of the valley, I slipped from my hiding-place and made my way up the path towards the gully where we had fixed our camp.

When I reached the firelight I saw that Nikola had dismounted from his camel and had entered his own tent. I found him removing his disguise and preparing to change back into his own garments.

"We have come out of that scrape very neatly," he said; "and I can only add, Bruce, that it is owing to your foresight and intelligence that we have done so. Had you not had the wit to try to obtain a glimpse of that man the other night, we should in all probability have been caught in a trap from which there would have been no escaping. As it is we have not only got rid of our enemy but have improved our position into the bargain. If we make as good progress in the future as we have done in the past we should be inside the monastery by tomorrow evening."

"I hope we shall," I answered; "but from what we have gone through of late I am induced to think that it could be wiser not to contemplate stocking our poultry-yard before we have seen that our incubator is in good forking order."

"You are quite right, we won't."

Half an hour later our evening meal was served, and when it was eaten we sat round the camp fire smoking and talking, the dancing flames lighting up the rocks around us, and the great stars winking grimly down at us from overhead. The night was very still; save the grunting of the picketed donkeys, the spluttering of the flames of the fire, the occasional cry of some night bird, and once the howl of a jackal among the rocks, scarcely a sound was to be heard. It cannot be considered extraordinary, therefore, if my thoughts turned to the girl I loved. I wondered if she were thinking of me, and if so, what she imagined I was doing. Our journey to the monastery was nearly at an end. How long we should remain there when we had once got inside I had not the very vaguest notion; but, if the luck which had followed us so far still held good, we ought soon to be able to complete our errand there and return with all speed to the coast. Then, I told myself, I would seek out my darling and, with her brother's permission, make her my wife. What I would do after that was for the Fates to decide. But of one thing I was convinced, and that was that as long as I lived I would never willingly set foot in China again.

Next morning, a little after daylight, we broke camp, packed the animals, mounted, and set off. For the first ten miles or so the track was a comparatively plain one, leading along a valley, the entrance to which was the gorge I had seen on the previous night. Then circling round the side of the mountain by a precipitous path we came out on to a long tableland, whence a lovely view could be obtained. The camel we had turned loose earlier in the day to roam the country, or to find its way back to its former owner, as might seem to it best. It was well that we did so, for at the elevation to which we had now ascended, travelling with it would have proved most difficult, if not altogether impossible. Not once but several times we had to dismount and clamber from rock to rock, making our way through ravines, and across chasms as best we could. On many occasions it looked as if it would be necessary for us to abandon even the surefooted animals we had brought with us, but in each case patience and perseverance triumphed over difficulties, and we were enabled to push on with them again.

By midday we had lost sight of the track altogether; the air had become bitterly cold, and it looked as if snow might fall at any minute. At half-past three a few flakes did descend, and by the time we found a camping-place, under an overhanging cliff, the ground was completely covered.

Being provided with plenty of warm clothing ourselves we were not so badly off, but for our poor coolies, whom nothing we had been able to say or do, before we set out, would induce to provide themselves with anything different to their ordinary attire, it was a matter of serious concern. Something had to be done for them. So choosing a hollow spot in the cliff into which we could all huddle, we collected a supply of brushwood and lit a bonfire at the mouth. Into this circle of warmth we led and picketed our donkeys, hoping to be able to keep them snug so that they should have sufficient strength left to continue their journey next day.

Every moment the snow was falling faster, and by the time we turned into our blankets it was nearly four inches deep around the camp. When we woke in the morning the whole contour of the country was changed. Where it had been bare and sterile the day before, we now had before us a plain of dazzling white. Unfortunately the intense cold had proved too much for one of our donkeys, for when we went to inspect them, we found him lying dead upon the ground. One of the smaller coolies was not in a much better state. Seeing this, Nikola immediately gave him a few drops of some liquid from that marvellous medicine-chest, without which, as I have already said, he never travelled. Whatever its constituents may have been it certainly revived the man for a time, and by the time we began our march again he was able to hobble along beside us. Within an hour of setting out, however, he was down again, and in half an hour he was dead, and we had buried him beneath the snow.

Our route now, by reason of the snow, was purely a matter of conjecture, for no track of any sort could be seen. As we could not turn back, however, and it was a dangerous matter to proceed without knowing in what direction to steer, our position might have been reckoned a fairly dangerous one. By the middle of the afternoon another of our coolies dropped, and, seeing this, Nikola decided to camp.

Choosing the most sheltered spot we could discover, we cleared away the snow and erected our tents, and, when this was done, lit a fire and picketed the remaining donkeys. The sick coolie we made as comfortable as possible with all the clothing we could spare, but the trouble was of little avail, for at nightfall he too reached the end of his journey.

By this time I must confess my own spirits had sunk down to the lowest depths. Nikola, however, was still undismayed.

"The death of these men," he said, "is a thing much to be regretted, but we must not let it break us down altogether. What do you say if we take that fellow out and bury him in the snow at once? There is still light enough if we are quick about it."

Having no more desire than he to spend the night in the company of the poor man's dead body, we lifted it up and carried it out to where a great drift of snow showed some fifty paces from our tent door. Here we deposited it and went back to the camp, leaving the softly falling flakes to cover him quite as effectually as we could have done. But that evening two more unpleasant facts revealed themselves to us. Our two remaining donkeys were unable to stand the rigour of the climate any longer, and were on the verge of dying. Seeing this, Nikola left the tent again, and taking his revolver with him, put an end to their sufferings. When they dropped he cut their throats, and then returned to the tent.

"What did you do that for?" I asked, at a loss to understand his last action.

"If you want an explanation," he said quietly, "examine the state of our larder, and then review our position. We are here on the tops of these mountains; one track is like another; where the monastery is I cannot tell you; and now, to add to our sorrows, our provisions are running short. Donkeys are not venison, but they are better than cold snow. And now you know why I shot them."

Accordingly, next morning before we began our journey, we cut up all that was worth carrying with us of the poor beasts. It was well that we did so, for our search for the monastery was no more successful on this occasion than it had been on the previous day. To add to the hopelessness of it all I was beginning to feel ill, while the one remaining coolie staggered on after us more like a galvanized corpse than a living man.

Sometimes in my dreams I live that dreadful time over again. I see the snow-covered country with its yawning precipices, gently sloping valleys, and towering heights; I picture our weary, heart-sick trio, struggling on and on, sinking into the white shroud at every step, Nikola always in advance, myself toiling after him, and the last coolie lagging in the rear. Round us the snow whirls and eddies, and overhead some great bird soars, his pinions casting a black shadow on the otherwise speckless white. Then the dream invariably changes, and I find myself waking with a certain nameless but haunting terror upon me, for which I cannot account. But to return to my narrative.

An hour before sundown the coolie dropped, and once more we had to camp. If I live to be a hundred I shall not forget a single particular connected with that ghastly night. We were so weak by this time that it was a matter of impossibility for us to erect a tent. A drowsiness that there seemed no withstanding had laid its finger upon us. Only the coolie could keep awake, and he chattered incoherently to himself in his delirium.

"Bruce," said Nikola about eight o'clock, coming round the fire to where I sat, "this will never do. That poor fellow over yonder will be dead in half an hour, and if you don't mind what you are about you will soon follow suit. I'm going to set to

work to keep you awake.”

So saying, this extraordinary individual produced his medicine-chest, and opened it by the fire. From inside the cover he produced a tiny draught-board and a box of men.

“May I have the pleasure of giving you a game?” he asked, as politely as if we were comparative strangers meeting in a London club. Half awake and half asleep, I nodded, and began to arrange my men. Then, when all was ready, we commenced to play, and before three moves had been executed, I had caught Nikola’s enthusiasm and was wide awake.

Whether I played it well or ill I cannot remember. I only know that Nikola worked out his plans, prepared strategies and traps for me, and not only that, but executed them, too, as if he had not a thought of anything else on his mind. Only stopping to throw wood upon the fire, and once to soothe the coolie just before he died, we played on till daylight. Then, after a hasty breakfast, we abandoned everything we had, save the medicine-chest, our few remaining provisions, and such small articles as we could stow about our persons, and started off on what we both believed must certainly prove our last march.

How strange are the workings of Fate! As we left the brow of that hill, and prepared to descend into the valley, we discerned before us, on the other side of the valley, a great stone building. It was the monastery, in search of which we had come so far and braved so much.



CHAPTER 29. THE MONASTERY

WE stood and looked across the valley, hardly able to believe that we had at last arrived at the place of which we had heard so much. There it stood gaunt and lonely, on the edge of the ravine, a dark grey collection of roofs and towers, and surrounded by a lofty wall. But, though we could see it plainly enough before us, the chief question was "How were we to reach it?" The cañon, to employ an American term, stretched to right and left of us, as far as the eye could reach, in unbroken grandeur. Certainly, on the side upon which we stood, the cliff sloped enough for an experienced mountaineer to clamber down, but across the ravine it rose a sheer precipice for fully 1,500 feet, and though I examined it carefully I could not see a single place where even a goat could find a footing.

"It would take us a week to go round," said Nikola, when he had examined it with his usual care; "and starving as we are we should be dead before we got half way."

"Then what are we to do?"

"Climb down into the valley, I suppose. It's Hobson's choice."

"It will be a terrible business," I said.

"You will find death up here equally undesirable," he answered. "The worst of it is, however, I don't see how we are going to reach it when we *do* get down there. But as it is within the sphere of practical politics, as they say, that we may break our necks on the way down, we had better postpone further argument until we know that we have arrived at the bottom with our lives. Come along then."

For the next ten minutes we occupied ourselves searching the cliff for the best climbing place. That once discovered we crawled over the edge and began our descent. For the first fifty yards or so it was comparatively easy work; we had nothing to do but to drop from rock to rock. Then matters became more difficult. An unbroken face of cliff, with only one small foothold in nearly forty feet, had to be negotiated. The wall at Pekin was not to be compared with it for difficulty, and, as I knew to my cost, I had found that quite difficult enough. How we were to manage this seemed to me incomprehensible. But as usual Nikola was equal to the occasion.

"Take off your coat," he said, "and give it to me."

I did as he ordered me, whereupon he divested himself of his own, and then tied the sleeves of the two garments together. This done we crawled along to the opposite end of the ledge, where grew one of the stunted trees which provided the only show of vegetation to be seen along the whole face of the cliff, and tied the end of the rope he had thus made, to a long and thick root which had straggled over the face of the cliff in the hope of finding a holding place. Thus we obtained an additional three feet, making in all nearly fifteen feet, which, when we had added our own length, should carry us down to the ledge with a foot to spare.

As soon as these preparations were completed, we tossed up (strange relic of civilization!) for the honour of going first and testing its strength, and, of course, the position fell to Nikola, whom Fate willed should be first in everything. Before setting off he carefully examined the strap by which his treasured medicine-chest was fastened round his neck, then with a nod of farewell to me knelt down upon the edge of the cliff, took the rope in his hands and began his descent. I have spent more enjoyable moments in my life than watching the strain upon that root. Of the coats themselves I had little fear; they were of the best silk, and, save where the sleeves joined the body, were woven in one piece. However the root held, and presently I heard Nikola calling to me to follow him. Not without a feeling of trepidation I lowered myself and went down hand over hand. Though the rope was a comparatively short one, it seemed centuries before I was anywhere near Nikola. Another three feet would find me on the ledge, and I was just congratulating myself on my cleverness when there was an ominous tearing noise on the cliff top, and the next moment I was falling backwards into midair. I gave myself up for lost, but fortunately the catastrophe was not as serious as it might have been, for with that presence of mind which never deserted him Nikola braced himself against the wall and clutched the rope as it slid by. The result of his action was that the force of my fall was broken, and instead of falling on to the little plateau below, and probably breaking my neck, or at least an arm or leg, I swung against the cliff and then slipped easily to the ground.

"Are you hurt?" cried Nikola from his perch above.

“More frightened than hurt,” I replied. “Now, how are you going to get down?”

Without vouchsafing any reply Nikola turned his face to the rock, went down upon his knees once more, and then clutching at the ledge lowered himself and finally let go. He landed safely beside me, and having ascertained that his medicine-chest was uninjured, went quietly across to where our coats had fallen and disengaged them from the broken root. Then having handed me mine he donned his own and suggested that we should continue our downward journey without more ado. I believe if Nikola were to fall by accident into the pit of Tophet, and by the exercise of superhuman ingenuity succeeded in scrambling out again, he would calmly seat himself on the brink of the crater and set to work to discover of what chemical substances the scum upon his garments was composed! I can assert with truth that in the whole of my experience of him I never once saw him really disconcerted.

Our climb from the plateau to the bottom of the valley--though still sufficiently dangerous to render it necessary that we should exercise the greatest caution--was not so difficult. At last we arrived at the foot, and, having looked up at the towering heights on either side of us, began to wonder what we had better do next.

We had not long to wait, however, for it appears our arrival had been observed. The bottom of the valley was covered with soft turf, dotted here and there with enormous rocks. We had just arranged to proceed in a westerly direction, and were in the act of setting out, when our ears were assailed by a curious noise. It was more like the sound of a badly blown Alpine horn than anything else, and seemed to be echoed from side to side of the path. Then a voice coming from somewhere close to us, but whence we could not tell, said slowly:

“Who are ye who thus approach the dwelling in the cliff?”

“I am he whom ye have been told to expect,” said Nikola.

“Welcome!” said the same passionless voice. Then, after a pause: “Go forward to yonder open space and wait.”

All the time that the voice was speaking I had been carefully listening in the hope of being able to discover whence it came, but my exertions were useless. One moment it seemed to sound from my right, the next from my left. It had also a quaint metallic ring that made it still more difficult to detect its origin. To properly explain my meaning, I might say that it was like the echo of a voice the original of which could not be heard. The effect produced was most peculiar.

When the voice had finished Nikola moved forward in the direction indicated, and I followed him.

Arriving at the place, we stood in the centre of the open space and waited. For nearly ten minutes we looked about us wondering what would happen next. There was nothing to be seen in the valley save the green grass and the big rocks, and nothing to be heard but the icy wind sighing through the grass and the occasional note of a bird. Then from among the rocks to our right appeared one of the most extraordinary figures I have ever seen in my life. He was little more than three feet in height, his shoulders were abnormally broad, his legs bowed so that he could only walk on the sides of his feet, while his head was so big as to be out of all proportion to his body. He was attired in Chinese dress, even to the extent of a pigtail and a little round hat. Waddling towards us he said in a shrill falsetto:

“Will your Excellencies be honourably pleased to follow me?”

Thereupon he turned upon his heel and preceded us up the valley for nearly a hundred yards. Then, wheeling round to see that we were close behind him, he marched towards what looked like a hole in the cliff and disappeared within. We followed to find him standing in a large cave, bowing on the sand as if in welcome. On either side in rows were at least a dozen dwarfs, dressed in exactly the same fashion, and every one as small and ugly as himself. They held torches in their hands, and as soon as they saw that we were following, they set off up the cave, headed by the little fellow who had come to meet us.

When we had penetrated into what seemed the bowels of the earth, we left the narrow passage and found ourselves confronted by a broad stone staircase which wound upwards in spiral form. The procession of dwarfs again preceded us, still without noise. It was a weird performance, and had it not been for the reek of the torches, and the fluttering of bats' wings as the brutes were disturbed by the flames and smoke, I should have been inclined to imagine it part of some extraordinary dream; indeed, more than once I felt an impulse to touch the stone wall in order to convince myself by its rough surface that I really was awake. I could see that Nikola was fully alive to all that was passing, and I noticed that he had adopted a demeanour consistent with the aged and important position he was supposed to be filling. Up and up the stairs wound, twisting and twining this way and that, till it almost made me giddy trying to remember how far we had come; indeed, my legs were nearly giving way under me, when we came to a halt before a large door at the top of the stairs.

This was thrown open, and our party filed through. From the level of the doorway a dozen more steps conducted us to the floor above, and here we came to a second stop. On looking about us we discovered that we were in an enormous hall of almost cathedral proportions. The raftered roof towered up for more than a hundred feet above our heads; to right and left were arches of strange design, while at the further end was an exquisite window, the glass of which was stained blood-red. The whole place was wrapt in semi-darkness, and though it had the appearance of a place of worship, I could distinguish no altar or anything to signify that it was used for sacred purposes.

As we reached the top the dwarf, who had met us in the valley and headed the procession up the stairs, signed to his followers to fall back on either hand and then led the way to a small square of masonry at the top of two steps and placed in the centre of the hall. Arriving there, he signed to us to take up our positions upon it, and himself mounted guard beside us.

For fully ten minutes we remained standing there, looking towards the blood-red window, and waiting for what would happen next. The silence was most unpleasant, and I had to exercise all my powers of self-control to prevent myself from allowing some sign of nervousness to escape me.

Then, without any warning, a sound of softest music greeted our ears, which gradually rose from the faintest pianissimo to the crashing chords of a barbaric march. It continued for nearly five minutes, until two doors, one on either side of what might be termed the chancel, opened, and a procession of men passed out. I call them men for the reason that I have no right to presume that they were anything else, but there was nothing in their appearance to support that theory. Each was attired in a long, black gown which reached to his feet, his hands were hidden in enormous sleeves, and his head was wrapped in a thick veil, thrown back to cover the poll and shoulders, with two round holes left for the eyes.

One after another they filed out and took up their positions in regular order on either side of us, all facing towards the window.

When the last had entered, and the doors were closed again, service commenced. The semi-darkness, through which the great red window glared like an evil eye, the rows of weird, black figures, the mysterious wailing chant and the recollection of the extraordinary character I had heard given to the place and its inmates, only increased the feeling of awe that possessed me.

When for nearly a quarter of an hour the monks had knelt at their devotions, the muffled notes of a great bell broke upon our ears. Then with one accord they rose to their feet again and filed solemnly out by the doors through which they had entered. When the last had disappeared we were left alone again in the same unearthly silence.

"What on earth does all this mean?" said Nikola in a whisper. "Why doesn't somebody come out to receive us?"

"There is a charnel-house air about the place," I answered, "that is the very reverse of pleasant."

"Hush!" said Nikola; "some one is coming."

As he spoke, a curtain in the chancel was drawn aside, and a man, dressed in the same fashion as those we had seen at their devotions a few minutes since, came down the steps towards us. When he reached the dais upon which we stood, he bowed, and beckoned to us with his finger to follow him. This we did, up the steps by which he had descended, and past the curtain. Here we found another flight of steps leading to a long corridor, on either side of which were many small cells. The only light obtainable came from the torch which our guide had taken from a bracket on leaving the chancel and now carried in his hand.

Without stopping, the monk led us along the whole length of the corridor, then turned to his right hand, descended three more steps, and having drawn back another curtain, beckoned to us to pass him into a narrow but lofty room. It was plainly furnished with a table, a couple of stools, and a rough bed, and was lighted by a narrow slit in the wall about three inches wide by twenty-five deep.

When we were both inside, our guide turned, and, approaching me, pointed first to myself and then to the room, as if signifying that this was for my use, then taking Nikola by the arm, he led him through another doorway in the corner to an inner apartment, which was evidently designed for his occupation. Presently he emerged again by himself, and went out still without speaking a word. A moment later Nikola appeared at his doorway and invited me to inspect his abode. It was like mine in every particular, even to the bracket for a torch upon the wall.

"We are fairly inside now," said Nikola, "and we shall either find out what we want to know within a very short space of time, or be sent to explore the mysteries of another world."

"It's within the bounds of possibility that we shall do both," I answered.

"One thing, Bruce, before we go any further," he said, not heeding my remark, "you must remember that this place is not like an ordinary Shamanist or Buddhist monastery where things are carried on slipshod fashion. Here every man practises the most rigid self-denial possible, and, among other things, I have no doubt the meals will prove inadequate. We shall have to reconcile ourselves to many peculiar customs, and all the time we must keep our eyes wide open so that we may make the most of every chance that offers."

"I don't mind the customs," I answered, "but I am sorry to hear about the meals, for to tell you the honest truth, at the present moment I am simply starving."

"It can't be helped," replied Nikola. "Even if we don't get anything till to-morrow evening we shall have to grin and bear it."

I groaned and went back to my room. It must have been nearly midday by this time, and we had eaten nothing since daybreak. I seated myself on my bed, and tried to reconcile myself to our position. I thought for some time, then a fit of drowsiness came over me, and before very long I was fast asleep.

For nearly two hours I must have remained unconscious of what was going on around me. When I woke my hunger was even greater than before. I rose from my bed, and went in to look at Nikola, only to find that extraordinary man occupied in his favourite way--working out abstruse problems on the floor. I did not disturb him, but returned to my own apartment, and fell to pacing the floor like a caged beast. I told myself that if I did not get a meal very soon I should do something desperate.

My hunger, however, was destined to be appeased before long. Just about sundown I heard the noise of footsteps in the corridor, and presently a bare-footed monk, dressed all in black, and wearing the same terrifying head-dress we had first seen in the great hall, made his appearance, carrying a large bowl in his hands. This he conveyed through my room and placed on Nikola's table.

When he entered, he found the latter upon his knees engaged in his devotions, and I began to reproach myself for having allowed him to catch me doing anything else.

The man had hardly left again, indeed, the sound of his footsteps had not died away on the stone steps, before I was in the inner room.

"Dinner is served," said Nikola, and went across to the bowl upon the table. To my dismay it contained little more than a pint of the thinnest soup mortal man ever set eyes on. In this ungenerous fluid floated a few grains of rice, but anything more substantial there was none. There was neither spoon nor bread, so how we were to drink it, unless we tilted the bowl up and poured it down our throats, I could not imagine. However, Nikola solved the difficulty by taking from his medicine-chest a small travelling cup, which he placed in my hand. Thereupon I set to work. Seeing that Nikola himself took scarcely more than a cupful, I remonstrated with him, but in vain. He said he did not want it, and that settled the matter. I accordingly finished what remained, and when I had done so felt as hungry as ever. If this were to be the fare of the monastery, I argued, by the time we left it, if leave it we did, I should be reduced to a skeleton.

When I had finished my meal, the long streak of light which had been under the window when we arrived, and had gradually crossed the floor, was now some feet up the opposite wall. A little later it vanished altogether. The room was soon in total darkness, and I can assure you my spirits were none of the best. I returned to Nikola's apartment not in the most cheerful of humours.

"This is very pleasant," I said ironically. "Are they never going to receive us properly?"

"All in good time," he answered quietly. "We shall have enough excitement to last us a lifetime presently, and I don't doubt that we shall be in some danger too."

"I don't mind the danger," I said; "it is this awful waiting that harasses my nerves."

"Well, you won't have long to wait. If I mistake not there is somebody coming for us now,"

"How do you know that?" I asked. "I can't hear anybody."

"Still they are coming," said Nikola. "If I were you I should go back into my room and be ready to receive them when they arrive."

I took the hint, and returned to my apartment, where I waited with all the patience I could command.

How Nikola knew that some one was coming to fetch us I cannot tell, but this much is certain, within five minutes of his having warned me I heard a man come down the steps, then a bright light appeared upon the wall, and a moment later the same dwarf who had ushered us into the monastery entered my room carrying a torch in his hand. Seeing that he desired speech with Nikola, I held up my hand to him in warning, and then, assuming an air of the deepest reverence, signed him to remain where he was while I proceeded into the inner room. Nikola was on the alert, and bade me call the man to him. This I did, and next moment the dwarf stood before him.

"I am sent, oh stranger," said the latter, "to summon thee to an audience with the Great Ones of the Mountains."

"I am prepared," said Nikola solemnly. "Let us go."

Thereupon the dwarf turned himself about and led the way out into the corridor. I had no desire to be left behind, so I followed close at Nikola's heels.

We ascended first a long flight of steps, threaded the same corridor by which we had entered, mounted another flight of stairs, crossed a large hall, and finally reached a small ante-chamber. Here we were told to wait while the dwarf passed through a curtain and spoke to some one within. When he emerged again he drew back the covering of the doorway and signed to us to enter. We complied with his request, to discover a rather larger apartment, which was guarded by a monk in the usual dress. He received us with a bow, and also without speaking, conducted us to another room, the door of which was guarded by yet another monk.

All this had a most depressing effect upon my nerves, and by the time we reached the last monk I was ready to jump away from my own shadow. I make these confessions, in the first place, because having set my hand to the tale, I think I have no right to withhold anything connected with my adventures, and in the second, because I don't want to pose as a more courageous man than I really was. I have faced danger as many times as most men, and I don't think my worst enemy could accuse me of cowardice, but I feel bound to confess that on this occasion I *was* nervous. And who would not have been?

On reaching the last ante-room Nikola passed in ahead of me, without looking to right or left, his head bent, and his whole attitude suggestive of the deepest piety. Here we were told to wait. The monk disappeared, and for nearly five minutes did not put in an appearance again. When he did he pointed to a door on the opposite side of the apartment, and requested that we would lose no time in entering.

We complied with his request to find ourselves in a large room, the hangings of which were all of the deepest black. By the light of the torches, fixed in brackets on the walls, we could distinguish two men seated in quaintly carved chairs on a sort of dais at the further end. They were dressed after the same fashion as the monks, and for this reason it was quite impossible to discover whether they were young or old. As soon as we got inside I came stiffly to attention alongside the door, while Nikola advanced and stood before the silent couple on the dais. For some moments no one spoke. Then the man on the right rose, and turning towards Nikola said:

"Who are ye, and by what right do ye thus brave our solitude?"

"I am He of Hankow, of whom thou hast been informed," answered Nikola humbly, with a low reverence. "And I have come because thou didst command."

"What proof have we of that?" inquired the first speaker.

"There is the letter sent forward by your messenger from the High Priest of the Llamaserai in Pekin, saying that I was coming," replied Nikola, "and I have this symbol that ye sent to me."

Here he exhibited the stick he had procured from Wetherell, and held it up that the other might see.

"And if this be true, what business have ye with us?"

"I am here that I may do the bidding of the living and of the dead."

"It is well," said the first speaker and sat down again.

For five minutes or so there was another silence, during which no one spoke, and no one moved. I stood on one side of the door, the monk who had admitted us on the other; Nikola was before the dais, and on it, rigid and motionless, the two black figures I have before described. When the silence had lasted the time I have mentioned I began to feel that if some one did not speak soon I should have to do so myself. The suspense was terrible, and yet Nikola stood firm, never moving a muscle or showing a sign of embarrassment.

Then the man who had not yet spoken said quietly:

“Hast thou prepared thyself for the office that awaits thee?”

“If it should fall out as ye intend,” said Nikola, “I am prepared.”

“Art thou certain that thou hast no fear?”

“Of that I am certain,” he replied.

“And what knowledge hast thou of such things as will pertain to thy office?” To my surprise Nikola answered humbly:

“I have no knowledge, but as thou knowest I have given my mind to the study of many things which are usually hid from the brain of man.”

“It is well,” answered this second man, after the manner of the first.

There was another silence, and then the man who had first addressed Nikola said with an air of authority:

“To-morrow night we will test thy knowledge and thy courage. For the present prepare thyself and wait.”

Thereupon the monk at the doorway beckoned to Nikola to follow him. He did so, and I passed out of the room at his heels. Then we were conducted back to our cells and left alone for the night.

As soon as our guide had departed I went in to Nikola.

“What do you think of our interview?” I inquired.

“That its successor to-morrow evening will prove of some real importance to us,” he answered. “Our adventure begins to grow interesting.”

“But are you prepared for all the questions they will ask?”

“I cannot say,” said Nikola. “I am remembering what I have been taught and leaving the rest to Fate. The luck which has attended us hitherto ought surely to carry us on to the end.”

“Well, let us hope nothing will go wrong,” I continued. “But I must confess I am not happy. I have seen more cheerful places than this monastery, and as far as diet is concerned, commend me to the cheapest Whitechapel restaurant.”

“Help me through to the end, and you shall live in luxury for the rest of your days.”

We talked for a little while and then retired to bed. For one day we had surely had enough excitement!

Next day we rose early, breakfasted on a small portion of rice, received no visitors, and did not leave our rooms all day. Only the monk who had brought us our food on the previous evening visited us, and, as on that occasion, he had nothing to say for himself. Our evening meal was served at sundown, and consisted of the same meagre soup as before. Then darkness fell, and about the same time as on the previous evening the dwarf appeared to conduct us to the rendezvous.



CHAPTER 30. AN ORDEAL

When we left our rooms on this occasion we turned to the right hand instead of to the left, and proceeded to a long corridor running below that in which our cells were situated. Whereabouts in the monastery this particular passage was placed, and how its bearings lay with regard to the staircase by which we had ascended from the valley on the previous day, I could not discover. Like all the others, however, it was innocent of daylight, but was lighted by enormous torches, which again were upheld by iron brackets driven into the walls. Once during our march an opportunity was vouchsafed me of examining these walls for myself, when to my astonishment I discovered that they were not hewn out of the rock as I had supposed, but were built of dressed stone of a description, remarkably resembling granite. This being so, I realized, for the first time, that the cells and the corridors were built by human hands, but how long it could have taken the builders to complete such an enormous task was a calculation altogether beyond my powers. But to return to my narrative.

From the corridor just described we passed down another flight of steps, then across a narrow landing, after which came another staircase. As we reached it our ears were assailed by a noise resembling distant thunder.

“What sound is that?” asked Nikola of our guide.

The dwarf did not answer in words, but, leading us along a side passage, held his torch above his head, and bade us look.

For a moment the dancing flame prevented us from seeing anything. Then our eyes became accustomed to the light, and to our amazement we discovered that we were standing on the very brink of an enormous precipice. In the abyss, the wind, which must have come in through some passage from the open air, tore and shrieked with a most dismal noise, while across the way, not more than twelve yards distant, fell the waters of a magnificent cataract. Picture to yourself that great volume of water crashing and roaring down through the darkness into the very bowels of the earth. The fall must have been tremendous, for no spray came up to us. All we could see was a mass of black water rushing past us. We stood and looked, open-mouthed, and when our wonder and curiosity were satisfied as much as it ever would be, turned and followed our guide back to the place where we had been standing when we had first heard the noise. At the other end of this corridor or landing, whichever you may please to term it, was a large stone archway, resembling a tunnel more than anything else, and at its mouth stood a monk. The dwarf went forward to him and said something in a low voice, whereupon he took a torch from the wall at his side and signed to us to follow him. The dwarf returned to the higher regions, while we plunged deeper still below the surface of the earth. Whether we were really as far down as we imagined, or whether the dampness was caused by some leakage from the cataract we had just seen, I cannot say; at any rate, the walls and floors were all streaming wet.

The passage, or tunnel, as I have more fittingly termed it, was a long one, measuring at least fifty feet from entrance to exit. When we had passed through it we stood in the biggest cave I have yet had the good fortune to behold; indeed, so large was it that in the half-dark it was with the utmost difficulty I could see the other side. Our guide led us across the first transept into the main aisle and then left us. No sign of furniture of any kind--either stool, altar, or dais--was to be seen, and as far as we could judge there was not a living soul within call. The only sound to be heard was the faint dripping of water, which seemed to come from every part of the cave.

“This is eerie enough to suit any one,” I whispered to Nikola. “I hope the performance will soon commence.”

“Hush!” he said. “Be careful what you say, for you don’t know who may overhear you.”

He had hardly spoken before the first mysterious incident of the evening occurred. We were standing facing that part of the cavern which had been on our right when we entered. The light was better in that particular spot than anywhere else, and I am prepared to swear that at that instant, to the best of my belief, there was not a human being between ourselves and the wall. Yet as we looked a shadow seemed to rise out of the ground before us; it came closer, and as it came it took human shape. The trick was a clever one and its working puzzles me to this day. Of course the man may have made his appearance from behind a pillar, specially arranged for the purpose, or he may have risen from a trap-door in the floor, though personally I consider both these things unlikely; the fact however remains, come he did.

“By your own desire, and of no force applied by human beings,” he said, addressing Nikola, “thou art here asking that

the wisdom of our order may be revealed to thee. There is still time to draw back if thou wouldst."

"I have no desire to draw back," Nikola answered firmly.

"So be it," said the man. "Then follow me."

Nikola moved forward, and I was about to accompany him when the man ahead of us turned, and pointing to me said: "Come no farther! It is not meet that thou shouldst see what is now to be revealed."

Nikola faced me and said quietly, "Remain."

Having given this order he followed the other along the cave and presently disappeared from my sight.

For some minutes I stood where they had left me, listening to the dripping of the water in the distant parts of the cave, watching the bats as they flitted swiftly up and down the gloomy aisles, and wondering into what mysteries Nikola was about to be initiated. The silence was most oppressive, and every moment that I waited it seemed to be growing worse. To say that I was disappointed at being thus shelved at the most important point in our adventure would scarcely express my feelings. Besides, I wanted to be at Nikola's right hand should any trouble occur.

As I waited the desire to know more of what he was doing grew upon me. I felt that come what might I must be present at the interview to which he had been summoned. No one, I argued, would be any the wiser, and even if by chance they should discover that I had followed them, I felt I could trust to my own impudence and powers of invention to explain my presence there. My mind was no sooner made up than I set off down the cave in the direction in which they had disappeared. Arriving at the further end I discovered another small passage, from which led still another flight of steps. Softly I picked my way down them, at the same time trying to reason out in my own mind how deep in the mountain we were, but as usual I could come to no satisfactory conclusion.

When I arrived at the bottom of the steps, I stood in a peculiar sort of crypt, supported by pillars, and surrounded on all sides by tiers of niches, or shelves, cut, after the fashion of the Roman catacombs, in the solid rock. This dismal place was lighted by three torches, and by their assistance I was able to discern in each niche a swaddled-up human figure. Not without a feeling of awe I left the steps by which I had descended and began to hunt about among the pillars for a doorway through which I might pass into the room below, where Nikola was engaged with the Great Ones of the Mountains. But though I searched for upwards of ten minutes, not a sign of any such entrance could I discover. I was now in a curious position. I had left my station in the larger cave and, in spite of orders to the contrary, had followed to witness what was not intended for my eyes; in that case, supposing the door at the top were shut, and I could find no other exit, I should be caught like a rat in a trap. To make matters worse, I should have disobeyed the strict command of the man who had summoned Nikola, and I should also have incurred the blame of Nikola himself. Remembering how rigorously he had dealt with those who had offended him before, I resolved in my own mind to turn back while I had the chance. But just as I was about to do so, something curious about the base of one of the pillars, to the right of where I stood, caught my eye. It was either a crack magnified by the uncertain light of the torches, or it was a doorway cleverly constructed in the stonework, and which had been improperly closed. I approached it, and, inserting the blade of my knife, pulled. It opened immediately, revealing the fact that the entire pillar was hollow, and what was more important to me, that it contained a short wooden ladder which led down into yet another crypt.

In an instant my resolution to return to the upper cave was forgotten. An opportunity of discovering their business was presented to me, and come what might I was going to make the most of it. Pulling the door open to its full extent I crept in and went softly down the ladder. By the time I reached the bottom I was in total darkness. For a moment I was at a loss to understand the reason of this, as I could plainly hear voices; but by dint of feeling I discovered that the place in which I stood was a sort of ante-chamber to a room beyond, the door of which was only partially shut. My sandals made no noise on the stone floor, and I was therefore able to creep up to the entrance of the inner room without exciting attention. What a sight it was that met my eyes!

The apartment itself was not more than fifty feet long by thirty wide. But instead of being like all the other places through which I had passed, an ordinary cave, this one was floored and wainscotted with woodwork now black with age. How high it was I could not guess, for the walls went up and up until I lost them in the darkness. Of furniture the room boasted but little; there was, however, a long and queer-shaped table at the further end, another near the door, and a tripod brazier on the left-hand side. The latter contained a mass of live coal, and, as there was some sort of forced draught behind it, it roared like a blacksmith's forge.

Nikola, when I entered, was holding what looked like a phial in his left hand. The black-hooded men I had expected to find there I could not see, but standing by his side were two dressed in a totally different fashion.

The taller of the pair was a middle-aged man, almost bald, boasting a pleasant, but slightly Semitic cast of countenance, and wearing a short black beard. His companion, evidently the chief, differed from him in almost every particular. To begin with, he was the oldest man I have ever seen in my life able to move about. He was small and shrivelled almost beyond belief, his skin was as yellow as parchment, and his bones, whenever he moved, looked as if they must certainly cut through their coverings. His countenance bore unmistakable traces of having once been extremely handsome, and was now full of intellectual beauty; at the same time, however, I could not help feeling certain that it was not the face of an Asiatic. Like his companion, he also wore a beard, but in his case it was long and snow-white, which added materially to his venerable appearance.

"My son," he was saying, addressing himself to Nikola, "hitherto thou hast seen the extent to which the particular powers of which we have been speaking can be cultivated by a life of continual prayer and self-denial. Now thou wilt learn to what extent our sect has benefited by earthly wisdom. Remember always that from time immemorial there have been those among us who have given up their lives to the study of the frailties and imperfections of this human frame. The wonders of medicine and all the arts of healing have come down to us from years that date from before the apotheosis of the ever-blessed Buddha. Day and night, generation after generation, century after century in these caves those of our faith have been studying and adding to the knowledge which our forefathers possessed. Remote as we are from it, every fresh discovery of the Western or Eastern world is known to us, and to the implements with which our forefathers worked we have added everything helpful that man has invented since. In the whole world there are none who hold the secret of life and death in their hands as we do. Wouldst thou have an example? There is a case at present in the monastery."

As he spoke he struck a gong hanging upon the wall, and almost before the sound had died away a monk appeared to answer it. The old fellow said something to him, and immediately he retired by the way he had come. Five minutes later he reappeared, followed by another monk. Between them they bore a stretcher, on which lay a human figure. The old man signed to them to place him in the centre of the room, which they did, and retired.

As soon as they had departed Nikola was invited to examine the person upon the stretcher. He did so, almost forgetting, in his excitement, his role of an old man.

For nearly five minutes he bent over the patient, who lay like a log, then he rose and turned to his companions.

"A complete case of paralysis," he said.

"You are assured in your own mind that it is complete?" inquired the old man.

"Perfectly assured," said Nikola.

"Then pay heed, for you are about to witness the power which the wisdom of all the ages has given us."

Turning to his companion he took from his hand a small iron ladle. This he placed upon the brazier, pouring into it about a tablespoonful of the mixture contained in the phial, which, when I first looked, Nikola had been holding in his hand. As the ladle became heated, the liquid, whatever it may have been, threw off a tiny vapour, the smell of which reminded me somewhat of a mixture of sandal-wood and camphor.

By the time this potion was ready for use the second man had divested the patient of his garments. What remained of the medicine was thereupon forced into his mouth, that and his nostrils were bound up, and after he had lost consciousness, which he did in less than a minute, he was anointed from head to toe with some penetrating unguent. Just as the liquid, when heating on the brazier, had done, this ointment threw off a vapour, which hung about the body, rising into the air to the height of about three inches. For something like five minutes this exhalation continued, then it began to die away, and as soon as it had done so the unguent was again applied, after which the two men kneaded the body in somewhat the same fashion as that adopted by masseurs. So far the colour of the man's skin had been a sort of zinc white, now it gradually assumed the appearance of that of a healthy man. Once more the massage treatment was begun, and when it was finished the limbs began to twitch in a spasmodic fashion. At the end of half an hour the bandage was removed from the mouth and nostrils, also the plugs from the ears, and the man, who had hitherto lain like one asleep, opened his eyes.

"Move thy arms," said the old man with an air of command.

The patient promptly did as he was commanded.

"Bend thy legs."

He complied with the order.

"Stand upon thy feet."

He rose from the stretcher and stood before them, apparently as strong and hearty a man as one could wish to see.

"To-morrow this treatment shall be repeated, and the day following thou shalt be cured. Now go and give thanks," said the old man with impressive sternness. Then turning to Nikola, he continued--

"Thou hast seen our powers. Could any man in the world without these walls do as much?"

"Nay, they are ignorant as earthworms," said Nikola. "But I praise Buddha for the man's relief."

"Praise to whom praise is due," answered the old fellow. "And now, having seen so much, it is fitting that thou shouldst go further, and to do so it is necessary that we put aside the curtain that divides man's life from death. Art thou afraid?"

"Nay," said Nikola, "I have no fear."

"It is well said," remarked the elder man, and again he struck the gong.

The monk having appeared in answer he gave him an order and the man immediately withdrew. When he returned, he and his companion brought with them another stretcher, upon which was placed the dead body of a man. The monk having withdrawn the old priest said to Nikola--

"Gaze upon this person, my son; his earthly pilgrimage is over; he died of old age to-day. He was one of our lay brethren, and a devout and holy man. It is meet that he should conduct thee, of whose piety we have heard so much, into our great inner land of knowledge. Examine him for thyself, and be sure that the spirit of life has really passed out of him."

Nikola bent over the bier and did as he was requested. At the end of his examination he said quietly--

"It is even as thou sayest; the brother's life is departed from him."

"Thou art convinced of the truth of thy words?" inquired the second man.

"I am convinced," said Nikola.

"Then I will once more show thee what our science can do."

With the assistance of his colleague he brought what looked like a large electric battery and placed it at the dead man's feet. The priest connected certain wires with the body, and, having taken a handle in either hand, placed himself in position, and shut his eyes. Though I craned my head round to see, I could not tell what he did. But this much is certain, after a few moments he swayed himself backwards and forwards, seemed to breathe with difficulty, and finally became almost rigid. Then came a long pause, lasting perhaps three minutes, at the end of which time he opened his eyes, raised his right arm, and pointed with his forefinger at the dead man's face. As he did so, to my horror, I saw the eyes open! Again he seemed to pray, then he pointed at the right arm, whereupon the dead man lifted it and folded it upon his breast, then at his left, which followed suit. When both the white hands were in this position he turned to Nikola and said--

"Is there aught in thy learning can give thee the power to do that?"

"There is nothing," said Nikola, who I could see was as much amazed as I was.

"But our power does not end there," said the old man.

"Oh, wonderful father! what further canst thou teach me?" asked Nikola. The man did not answer, but again closed his eyes for a few moments. Then, still holding the handles but pointing them towards the dead man, he cried in a loud voice--

"Ye who are dead, arise!"

And then--but I do not expect you will believe me when I tell it--that man who had been ten hours dead, rose little by little from his bier and at last stood before us. I continued to watch what happened. I saw Nikola start forward as if carried out of himself. I saw the second man extend his arm to hold him back, and then the corpse fell in a heap upon the floor. The two men instantly sprang forward, lifted it up, and placed it upon the stretcher again.

"Art thou satisfied?" inquired the old man.

"I am filled with wonder. Is it possible that I can see more?" said Nikola.

"Thou wouldst see more?" asked the chief of the Two in a sepulchral tone. "Then, as a last proof of our power, before thou takest upon thee the final vows of our order, when all our secrets must be revealed to thee, thou shalt penetrate the Land of Shadows, and see, as far as is possible for human eyes, the dead leaders of our order, of all ages, stand before you."

With that he took from a bag hanging round his waist a handful of what looked like dried herbs. These he threw upon the fire, and almost instantly the room was filled with a dense smoke. For some few seconds I could distinguish nothing, then it drew slowly off, and little by little I seemed to see with an extraordinary clearness. Whether it was that I was hypnotized, and fancied I saw what I am about to describe, or whether it really happened as I say, I shall never know. One thing, however, is certain--the room was filled with the shadowy figures of men. They were of all ages, and apparently of all nations. Some were Chinese, some were Cingalese, some were Thibetans, while one or two were certainly Aryans, and for all I knew to the contrary, might have been English. The room was filled with them, but there was something plainly unsubstantial about them. They moved to and fro without sound, yet with regular movements. I watched them, and as I watched, a terror, such as I had never known in my life before, came over me. I felt that if I did not get out of the room at once I should fall upon the floor in a fit. In this state I made my way towards the door by which I had entered, fled up the ladder, through the crypt, and then across the cave to the place where I had stood when Nikola had left me, and then fell fainting upon the floor.

How long I remained in this swoon I cannot tell, but when I came to myself again I was still alone.

It must have been quite an hour later when Nikola joined me. The monk who had brought us into the hall accompanied him, and led us towards the tunnel. There the dwarf received us and conducted us back to our apartments.

Once there, Nikola, without vouchsafing me a word, retired into the inner room. I was too dazed, and, I will confess, too frightened by what I had seen to feel equal to interviewing him, so I left him alone.

Presently, however, he came into my room, and crossing to where I sat on my bed, placed his hand kindly upon my shoulder. I looked up into his face, which was paler than I had ever seen it before.

"Bruce," he said, not without a little touch of regret in his voice, "how was it that you did not do what you were told?"

"It was my cursed curiosity," I said bitterly. "But do not think I am not sorry. I would give all I possess in the world not to have seen what I saw in that room."

"But you *have* seen, and nothing will ever take away that knowledge from you. You will carry it with you to the grave."

"The grave," I answered bitterly. "What hope is there even in the grave after what we have seen tonight? Oh, for Heaven's sake, Nikola, let us get out of this place to-night if possible."

"So you are afraid, are you?" he answered with a strange expression on his face. "I did not think you would turn coward, Bruce."

"In this I *am* a coward," I answered. "Give me something to do, something human to fight, some tangible danger to face, and I am your man! But I am not fit to fight against the invisible."

"Come, come, cheer up!" said Nikola. "Things are progressing splendidly with us. Our identity has not been questioned; we have been received by the heads of the sect as the people we pretend to be, and tomorrow I am to be raised to the rank of one of the Three. The remaining secrets will then be revealed to me, and when I have discovered all I want to know, we will go back to civilization once more. Think of what I may have achieved by this time to-morrow. I tell you, Bruce, such an opportunity might never come to a Western man again. It will be invaluable to me. Think of this, and then it will help your pluck to go through with it to the end!"

"If I am not asked to see such things as I saw tonight, it may," I answered, "but not unless."

"You must do me the credit to remember you were not asked to see them."

"I know that, and I have paid severely for my disobedience."

"Then let us say no more about it. Remember, Bruce, I trust you."

"You need have no fear," I said, after a pause, lasting a few moments. "Even if I could get out of it, for your sake I would go through with it, come what might."

"I thank you for that assurance. Good-night."

So saying, Nikola retired to his room, and I laid myself down upon my bed, but, you may be sure, it was not to sleep.



CHAPTER 31. THE INSTALLATION

As soon as I woke next morning I went into Nikola's room. To my surprise he was not there. Nor did he put in an appearance until nearly an hour later. When he did, I could see that he was completely exhausted, though he tried hard not to show it.

"What have you been doing?" I asked, meeting him on the threshold with a question.

"Qualifying myself for my position by being initiated into more mysteries," he answered. "Bruce, if you could have seen all that I have done since midnight tonight, I verily believe it would be impossible for you ever to be a happy man again. When I tell you that what I have witnessed has even frightened me, you will realize something of what I mean."

"What have you seen?"

"I have been shown the flesh on the mummified bodies of men who died nearly a thousand years ago made soft and healthy as that of a little child; I have seen such surgery as the greatest operator in Europe would consider impossible; I have been shown a new anaesthetic that does not deprive the patient of his senses, and yet renders him impervious to pain; and I have seen other things, such that I dare not describe them even to you."

"And you were not tempted to draw back?"

"Only once," answered Nikola candidly. "For nearly a minute, I will confess, I hesitated, but eventually I forced myself to go on. That once accomplished, the rest was easy. But I must not stay talking here. To-day is going to be a big day with us. I shall go and lie down in order to recoup my energies. Call me if I am wanted, but otherwise do not disturb me."

He went into the inner room, laid himself down upon his bed, and for nearly two hours slept as peacefully as a little child. The morning meal was served soon after sunrise, but I did not wake him for it; indeed, it was not until nearly midday that he made his appearance again. When he did, we discussed our position more fully, weighed the pros and cons more carefully, and speculated still further as to what the result of our adventure would be. Somehow a vague feeling of impending disaster had taken possession of me. I could not rid myself of the belief that before the day was over we should find our success in some way reversed. I told Nikola as much, but he only laughed, and uttered his usual reply to the effect that, disaster or no disaster, he was not going to give in, but would go through with it to the bitter end, whatever the upshot might be.

About two o'clock in the afternoon a dwarf put in an appearance, and intimated that Nikola's presence was required in the great hall. He immediately left the cell, and remained away until dusk. When he returned he looked more like a ghost than a man, but even then, tired as he undoubtedly was, his iron will would not acknowledge such a thing as fatigue. Barely vouchsafing me a word he passed into the inner room, to occupy himself there until nearly eight o'clock making notes and writing up a concise account of all that he had seen. I sat on my bed watching the dancing of his torch flame upon the wall, and feeling about as miserable as it would be possible for a man to be. Why I should have been so depressed I cannot say. But it was certain that everything served to bring back to me my present position. I thought of my old English school, and wondered if I had been told then what was to happen to me in later life whether I should have believed it. I thought of Gladys, my pretty sweetheart, and asked myself if I should ever see her again; and I was just in the act of drawing the locket she had given me from beneath my robe, when my ear caught the sound of a footstep on the stones outside. Next moment the same uncanny dwarf who had summoned us on the previous evening made his appearance. Without a word he pointed to the door of the inner room. I supposed the action to signify that those in authority wished Nikola to come to them, and went in and told him so. He immediately put away his paper and pencil, and signed to me to leave his room ahead of him. The dwarf preceded us, I came next, and Nikola following me. In this fashion we made our way up one corridor and down another, ascended and descended innumerable stairs, and at last reached the tunnel of the great cavern, the same in which we had passed through such adventures on the preceding night. On this occasion the door was guarded by fully a dozen monks, who formed into two lines to let us pass.

If the cave had been bare of ornament when we visited it the previous night, it was now altogether different. Hundreds of torches flamed from brackets upon the walls, distributed their ruddy glare upon the walls and ceiling, and were reflected, as in a million diamonds, in the stalactites hanging from the roof.

At the further end of the great cavern was a large and beautifully decorated triple throne, and opposite it, but half-way down the hall, a dais covered with a rich crimson cloth bordered with heavy bullion fringe. As we entered we were greeted with the same mysterious music we had heard on the day of our arrival. It grew louder and louder until we reached the dais, and then, just as Nikola took up his place at the front, and I mine a little behind him, began to die slowly away again. When it had ceased to sound a great bell in the roof above our heads struck three. The noise it made was almost deafening. It seemed to fill the entire cave, then, like the music above mentioned, to die slowly away again. Once more the same number of strokes were repeated, and once more the sound died away. When it could no longer be heard, curtains at the further end were drawn back, and the monks commenced to file slowly in from either side, just as they had done at the first service after our arrival. There must have been nearly four hundred of them; they were all dressed in black and all wore the same peculiar head-covering I have described elsewhere.

When they had taken their places on either side of the dais upon which we stood, the curtain which covered the doorway, through which I had followed Nikola down into the subterranean chamber the night before, was drawn aside and another procession entered. First came the dwarfs, to the number of thirty, each carrying a lighted torch in his hand; following them were nearly a hundred monks, in white, swinging censers, then a dozen grey-bearded priests in black, but without the head-covering, after which the two men who were the heads of this extraordinary sect.

Reaching the throne the procession divided itself into two parts, each half taking up its position in the form of a crescent on either side. The two heads seated themselves beneath the canopy, and exactly at the moment of their doing so the great bell boomed forth again. As its echo died away all the monks who had hitherto been kneeling rose to their feet and with one accord took up the hymn of their sect. Though the music and words were barbaric in the extreme, there was something about the effect produced that stirred the heart beyond description. The hymn ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and then, from among the white-robed monks beside the throne, a man stepped forth with a paper in his hand. In a loud voice he proclaimed the fact that it had pleased the two Great Ones of the Mountains to fill the vacancy which had so long existed in the triumvirate. For that reason they had summoned to their presence a man who bore a reputation for wisdom and holiness second to none. Him they now saw before them. He had rendered good service to the Society, he had been proved to be a just man, and now it only remained for him to state whether he was willing to take upon himself the responsibilities of the office to which he had been called. Having finished his speech, the man retired to his place again. Then four of the monks in white, two from either side of the throne, walked slowly down the aisle towards Nikola, and, bidding him follow them, escorted him in procession to the room behind the curtain. While he was absent from the cave no one moved or spoke.

At the end of something like ten minutes the small procession filed out again, Nikola coming last. He was now attired in all the grand robes of his office. His tall, spare form and venerable disguise became them wonderfully well, and when he once more stood upon the dais before me I could not help thinking I had never in my life seen a more imposing figure.

Again the great bell tolled out, and when the sound had ceased, the man who had first spoken stepped forward and in a loud voice bade it be known to all present that the ex-priest of Hankow was prepared to take upon himself the duties and responsibilities of his office. As he retired to his place again two monks came forward and escorted Nikola up the centre aisle towards the triple throne. Arriving at the foot the two Great Ones threw off the veils they had hitherto been wearing, and came down to meet him. Having each extended a hand, they were about to escort him to his place when there was a commotion at the end of the hall.

In a flash, though so far the sound only consisted of excited whispering, all my forebodings rushed back upon me, and my heart seemed to stand still. The Chief of the Three dropped Nikola's hand, and, turning to one of the monks beside him, bade him go down the hall and discover what this unseemly interruption might mean.

The man went, and was absent for some few minutes. When he returned it was to report that there was a stranger in the monastery who craved immediate speech with the Two on a matter concerning the election about to take place.

He was ordered to enter, and in a few minutes a travel-stained, soiled and bedraggled Chinaman made his appearance and humbly approached the throne. His four followers remained clustered round the door at the further end.

"Who art thou, and what is thy business here?" asked the old man in a voice that rang like a trumpet call. "Thinkest thou that thou wilt be permitted to disturb us in this unseemly fashion?"

"I humbly sue for pardon. But I have good reason, my father!" returned the man, with a reverence that nearly touched

the ground.

"Let us hear it then, and be speedy. What is thy name, and whence comest thou?"

"I am the Chief Priest of the temple of Hankow, and I come asking for justice," said the man, and as he said it a great murmur of astonishment ran through the hall. I saw Nikola step back a pace and then stand quite still. If it were the truth this man was telling we were lost beyond hope of redemption.

"Thou foolish man to come to us with so false a story!" said the elder of the Two. "Knowest thou not that the Priest of Hankow stands before thee?"

"It is false!" said the man. "I come to warn you that that man is an impostor. He is no priest, but a foreign devil who captured me and sent me out of the way while he took my place."

"Then how didst thou get here?" asked the chief of the sect.

"I escaped," said the man, "from among those whom he paid to keep me, and made my way to Tientsin, thence to Pekin, and so on here."

"O my father!" said Nikola, just as quietly as if nothing unusual were happening, "wilt thou allow such a cunningly-devised tale to do me evil in thy eyes? Did I not bring with me a letter from the High Priest of the Llamaserai, making known to thee that I am he whom thou didst expect? Wilt thou then put me to shame before the world?"

The old man did not answer.

"I, too, have a letter from the High Priest," said the new arrival eagerly. Whereupon he produced a document and handed it to the second of the Two.

"Peace! peace! We will retire and consider upon this matter," said the old man. Then turning to the monks beside him he said sternly: "See that neither of these men escape." After which he retired with his colleague to the inner room, whence they had appeared at the beginning of the ceremony.

In perfect silence we awaited their return, and during the time they were absent, I noticed a curious fact that I had remarked once or twice in my life before. Though all day I had been dreading the approach of some catastrophe, when it came, and I had to look it fairly in the face, all my fears vanished like mist before the sun. My nervousness left me like a discarded cloak, and so certain seemed our fate that I found I could meet it with almost a smile.

At the end of about twenty minutes there was a stir near the door, and presently the Two returned and mounted their thrones. It was the old man who spoke.

"We have considered the letters," he said, "and in our wisdom we have concluded that it would be wisest to postpone our judgment for awhile. This matter must be further inquired into." Then turning to Nikola, he continued: "Take off those vestments. If thou art innocent they shall be restored to thee, and thou shall wear them with honour to thyself and the respect of all our order; but if thou art guilty, prepare for death, for no human soul shall save thee." Nikola immediately divested himself of his gorgeous robes, and handed them to the monks who stood ready to receive them.

"Thou wilt now," said the old man, "be conducted back to the cells thou hast hitherto occupied. To-night at a later hour this matter will be considered again."

Nikola bowed with his peculiar grace, and then came back to where I stood, after which, escorted by a double number of monks, we returned to our rooms and were left alone, not however before we had noted the fact that armed guards were placed at the gate at the top of the steps leading into the main corridor.

When I had made sure that no one was near enough to eavesdrop, I went into Nikola's room, expecting to find him cast down by the failure of his scheme. I was about to offer him my condolences, but he stopped me by holding up his hand.

"Of course," he said, "I regret exceedingly that our adventure should have ended like this. We must not grumble, however, for we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have played our cards like men. We have lost on the odd trick, that is all."

"And what is the upshot of it all to be?"

"Very simple, I should say. If we don't find a way to escape we shall pay the penalty of our rashness with our lives. I don't know that I mind so much for myself, though I should very much like to have had an opportunity of putting into practice a few of the things I have learnt here; but I certainly do regret for your sake."

"That is very good of you."

"Oh, make no mistake, I am thinking of that poor little girl in Pekin who believes so implicitly in you."

"For Heaven's sake don't speak of her or I shall turn coward! Are you certain that there is no way of escape?"

"To be frank with you I do not see one. You may be sure, however, that I shall use all my ingenuity to-night to make my case good, though I have no hope that I shall be successful. This man, you see, holds all the cards, and we are playing a lone hand against the bank. But there, I suppose it is no use thinking about the matter until after the trial to-night."

The hours wore slowly on, and every moment I expected to hear the tramp of feet upon the stones outside summoning us to the investigation. They came at last, and two monks entered my room, and bade me fetch my master. When I had done so we were marched in single file up the stairs and along the corridor, this time to a higher level instead of descending as on previous occasions.

Arriving on a broad landing we were received by an armed guard of monks. One of them ordered us to follow him, and in response we passed through a doorway and entered a large room, at the end of which two people were seated at a table; behind them and on either side were rows of monks, and between guards at the further end, the man who had brought the accusation against us.

At a signal from a monk, who was evidently in command of the guard, I was separated from Nikola, and then the trial commenced.

First the newcomer recited his tale. He described how in the village of Tsan-Chu he had been met and betrayed by two men, who, having secured his person, had carried him out to sea, and imprisoned him aboard a junk. His first captors, it was understood, were Englishmen, but he was finally delivered into the care of a Chinaman, who had conveyed him to Along Bay. From this place he managed to effect his escape, and after great hardships reached Tientsin. On arrival there he made inquiries which induced him to push on to Pekin. Making his way to the Llamaserai, and being able to convince the High Priest of his identity, he had learned to his astonishment that he was being impersonated, and that the man who was filling his place had preceded him to Thibet.

On the strength of this discovery he obtained men and donkeys, and came on to the monastery as fast as he could travel.

At the end of his evidence he was closely questioned by both of the great men, but his testimony was sound and could not be shaken. Then his attendants were called up and gave their evidence, after which Nikola was invited to make his case good.

He accepted the invitation with alacrity, and, reviewing all that his rival had said, pointed out the manifest absurdities with which it abounded, ridiculed what he called its inconsistency, implored his judges not to be led away by an artfully contrived tale, and brought his remarks to a conclusion by stating, what was perfectly true, though hardly in the manner he intended, that he had no doubt at all as to their decision. A more masterly speech it would have been difficult to imagine. His keen instinct had detected the one weak spot in his enemy's story, and his brilliant oratory helped him to make the most of it. His points told, and to my astonishment I saw that he had already influenced his judges in his favour. If only we could go on as we had begun, we might yet come successfully out of the affair. But we were reckoning without our host.

"Since thou sayest that thou art the priest of the temple of Hankow," said the younger of the two great men, addressing Nikola, "it is certain that thou must be well acquainted with the temple. In the first hall is a tablet presented by a Taotai of the province: what is the inscription upon it?"

"With the gods be the decision as to what is best for man," said Nikola without hesitation.

I saw that the real priest was surprised beyond measure at this ready answer.

"And upon the steps that lead up to it, what is carved?"

"Let peace be with all men!" said Nikola, again without stopping. The judge turned to the other man.

"There is nothing there," he said; and my heart went down like lead.

"Now I know," said the old man, turning to Nikola, "that you are not what you pretend. There are no steps; therefore there can be nothing written upon them."

Then turning to the guards about him he said--

"Convey these men back to the room whence they came. See that they be well guarded, and at daybreak to-morrow

morning let them be hurled from the battlements down into the valley below.”

Nikola bowed, but said never a word. Then, escorted by our guards, we returned to our room. When we had arrived there, and the monks had left us to take up their places at the top of the steps outside, I sat myself down on my bed and covered my face with my hands. So this was what it had all come to. It was for this I had met Nikola in Shanghai; to be hurled from the battlements, the fate for which we had braved so many dangers.



CHAPTER 32. A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE

Hour after hour I sat upon my bed-place, my mind completely overwhelmed by the consideration of our terrible position. We were caught like rats in a trap, and, as far as I could see, the only thing left for us to do now was to continue our resemblance to those animals by dying game. For fear lest my pluck should give way I would not think of Gladys at all, and when I found I could no longer keep my thoughts away from her, I went into the adjoining room to see what Nikola was doing. To my surprise I found him pacing quietly up and down, just as calm and collected as if he were waiting for dinner in a London drawing-room. "Well, Bruce," he said, as I entered, "it looks as if another three hours will see the curtain rung down upon our comedy."

"Tragedy, I should call it," I answered bitterly.

"Isn't it rather difficult to define where one begins and the other ends?" he asked, as if desirous of starting an argument. "Plato says----"

"Oh, confound Plato!" I answered sharply. "What I want to know is how you are going to prevent our being put to death at daybreak."

"I have no intention that we shall be," said Nikola.

"But how are you going to prevent it?" I inquired.

"I have not the remotest notion," he answered, "but all the same I *do* intend to prevent it. The unfortunate part of it is that we are left so much in the dark, and have no idea where the execution will take place. If that were once settled we could arrange things more definitely. However, do not bother yourself about it; go to bed and leave it to me."

I went back into my own room and laid myself down upon my bed as he commanded. One thought followed another, and presently, however singular it may seem, I fell fast asleep. I dreamt that I was once more walking upon the wall in Pekin with my sweetheart. I saw her dear face looking up into mine and I felt the pressure of her little hand upon my arm. Then suddenly from over the parapet of the wall in front of us appeared the man who had discovered my identity in the Llamaserai; he was brandishing a knife, and I was in the act of springing forward to seize him when I felt my shoulder rudely shaken, and woke up to discover a man leaning over me.

One glance told me that it was one of the monks who had conducted us to the room, and on seeing that I was awake he signed to me to get up. By this time a second had brought Nikola from his room, and as soon as we were ready we were marched out into the corridor, where we found about a dozen men assembled.

"It seems a pity to have disturbed us so early," said Nikola, as we fell into our places and began to march up the long passage, "especially as I was just perfecting a most admirable scheme which I feel sure would have saved us."

"You are too late now," I answered bitterly.

"So it would appear," said Nikola, and strode on without further comment.

To attempt to describe to you my feelings during that march through those silent corridors, would be impossible. Indeed, I hardly like to think of it myself. What the time was I had no idea, nor could I tell to what place we were being conducted. We ascended one stair and descended another, passed through large and small caves and threaded endless corridors, till I lost all count of our direction. At last, however, we came to a halt at the foot of the smallest staircase I had yet seen in the monastery. We waited for a few moments, then ascended it and arrived at a narrow landing, at the end of which was a large door. Here our procession once more halted. Finally the doors were unbarred and thrown open, and an icy blast rushed in. Outside we could see the battlements, which were built on the sheer side of the cliff. It was broad daylight, and bitterly cold. Snow lay upon the roof-tops, but the air was transparently clear; indeed when we passed outside we could plainly distinguish the mountains across the valley where we had lost our coolies and donkeys only a week or so before.

Once in the sunshine our guides beat their torches against the wall till the flames were extinguished, and then stood at attention. From their preparations it was evident that the arrival of some person of importance was momentarily expected.

All this time my heart was beating like a wheat-flail against my ribs, and, try how I would to prevent them, my teeth were chattering in my head like castanets. As our gaolers had brought us up here it was evident we were going to be thrown

over the cliff, as had been first proposed. I glanced round me to see if it would be possible to make a fight for it, but one glimpse showed me how utterly futile such an attempt would be.

While I was arguing this out in my own mind our guards had somewhat relaxed their stiffness; then they came suddenly to attention, and next moment, evidently with a signal from the other side, we were marched to a spot further along the battlements.

Here the two great men of the monastery were awaiting us, and as soon as we made our appearance they signed to our guides to bring us closer to them. The old man was the first to speak.

"Men of the West! ye have heard your sentence," he said in a low and solemn voice. "Ye have brought it upon yourselves; have ye anything to urge why the decree should not be executed."

I looked at Nikola, but he only shook his head. Hard as I tried I could not discover sufficient reason myself, so I followed his example.

"Then let it be so," said the old man, who had noticed our hesitation; "there is nought to be done save to carry out the work. Prepare ye for death."

We were then ordered to stand back, and, until I heard another commotion on the stairs, I was at a loss to understand why we were not immediately disposed of. Then a second procession of monks appeared upon the battlements escorting a third prisoner. He was a tall, burly fellow, and from the way in which he was dressed and shaved I gathered had been a monk. He made his appearance with evident reluctance, and when he arrived at the top of the steps had to be dragged up to face the Two. Their interview was short, and even more to the point than our own.

"Thou hast murdered one of thy brethren," said the old man, still in the same sepulchral tone in which he had addressed us. "Hast thou anything to say why the sentence of death passed upon thee should not be carried into effect?"

In answer the man first blustered, then became stolid, and finally howled outright. I watched him with a curiosity which at any other time I should have deemed impossible. Then, at a signal from the old man, four stalwart monks rushed forward, and, having seized him, dragged him to the edge of the battlements. The poor wretch struggled and screamed, but he was like a child in the hands of those who held him. Closer and closer they drew to the edge. Then there was an interval of fierce struggling, a momentary pause, a wild cry, and next moment the man had disappeared over the edge, falling in a sheer drop quite fifteen hundred feet into the valley below. As he vanished from our sight my heart seemed to stand still. The poor wretch's cry still rang in my ears, and in another minute I knew it would be our turn.

I looked up at the blue sky above our heads, across which white clouds were flying before the breeze; I looked across the valley to where the snow-capped peaks showed on the other side, then at the battlements of the monastery, and last at the crowd of black figures surrounding us. In a flash all my past life seemed to rise before my eyes. I saw myself a little boy again walking in an English garden with my pretty mother, with my play-fellows at school, at sea, on the Australian gold-fields, and so on through almost every phase of my life up to the moment of our arrival at the place where we now stood. I looked at Nikola, but his pale face showed no sign of emotion. I will stake my life that he was as cool at that awful moment as when I first saw him in Shanghai. Presently the old man came forward again.

"If ye have ought to say--any last request to make--there is still time to do it," he said.

"I have a request to make," answered Nikola. "Since we *must* die, is it not a waste of good material to cast us over that cliff? I have heard it said that my skull is an extraordinary one, while my companion here boasts such a body as I would give worlds to anatomise. I have no desire to die, as you may suppose; but if nothing will satisfy you save to kill us, pray let us die in the interests of science."

Whether they had really intended to kill us, I cannot say, but this singular request of my companion's did not seem to cause as much astonishment as I had expected it would do. He consulted with his colleague, and then turned to Nikola again.

"Thou art a brave man," he said.

"One must reconcile oneself to the inevitable," said Nikola coolly. "Have you any objection to urge?"

"We will give it consideration," said the old man. "The lives of both of you are spared for the time being."

Thereupon our guards were called up, and we were once more marched back to our room. Arriving there, and when the monks had departed to take up their positions at the top of the staircase as before, Nikola said:--

"If we escape from this place, you will never be able to assert that science has done nothing for you. At least it has saved your life."

"But if they are going to scoop your brains out and to practise their butchery on me," I said with an attempt at jocularity I was far from feeling, "I must say I fail to see how it is going to benefit us."

"Let me explain," said Nikola. "If they are going to use us in the manner you describe, they cannot do so before tomorrow morning, for I happen to know that their operating room is undergoing alterations, and, as I am a conscientious surgeon myself, I should be very loath to spoil my specimens by any undue hurry. So you see we have at any rate all to-night to perfect our plan of escape."

"But have you a plan?" I asked anxiously.

"There is one maturing somewhere in the back of my head," said Nikola.

"And you think it will come to anything?"

"That is beyond my power to tell," he answered; "but I will go so far as to add that the chances are in our favour."

Nothing would induce him to say more, and presently he went back into his own room, where he began to busy himself with his precious medicine-chest, which I saw he had taken care to hide.

"My little friend," he said, patting and fondling it as a father would do his favourite son, "I almost thought we were destined to part company; now it remains for you to save your master's life."

Then turning to me he bade me leave him alone, and in obedience to his wish I went back to my own room.

How we survived the anxiety of that day I cannot think; such another period of waiting I never remember. One moment I felt confident that Nikola would carry out his plan, and that we should get away to the coast in safety; the next I could not see how it could possibly succeed, the odds being so heavy against us.

Almost punctually our midday meal was served to us, then the ray of light upon the floor began to lengthen, reached the opposite wall, climbed it, and finally disappeared altogether.

About seven o'clock Nikola came in to me.

"Look here, Bruce," he said with unusual animation, "I've been thinking this matter out, and I believe I've hit on a plan that will save us if anything can. In half an hour the monk will arrive with our last meal. He will place the bowl upon the floor over there, and will then turn his back on you while he puts his torch in the bracket upon the wall yonder. We will have a sponge, saturated with a little anaesthetic I have here, ready for him, and directly he turns I will get him by the throat and throttle him while you clap it over his nose. Once he's unconscious you must slip on his dress, and go out again and make your way up the steps. There are two men stationed on the other side, and the door between us and them is locked. I have noticed that the man who brings us our food simply knocks upon it and it is opened. You will do as he does, thus, and as you pass out will drop this gold coin as if by accident." (Here he gave me some money.) "One of the men will be certain to stoop to pick it up; as he goes down you must manage by hook or crook to seize and choke the other. I shall be behind you, and I will attend to his companion."

"It seems a desperate scheme."

"We are desperate men!" said Nikola.

"And when we have secured them?" I asked.

"I shall put on one of their robes," this intrepid man answered, "and we will then make our escape as quickly as possible. Luck must do the rest for us. Are you prepared to attempt so much?"

"To get out of this place I would attempt anything," I answered.

"Very good then," he said. "We must now wait for the appearance of the man. Let us hope it won't be long before he comes."

For nearly three-quarters of an hour we waited without hearing any sound of the monk. The minutes seemed long as years, and I don't think I ever felt more relieved in my life than I did when I heard the door at the top of the stairs open, and detected the sound of sandalled feet coming down the steps.

"Are you ready?" whispered Nikola, putting the sponge down near me, and returning to his own room.

"Quite ready," I answered.

The man came nearer, the glare of his torch preceding him. At last he entered, carrying a light in one hand and a large

bowl in the other. The latter he put down upon the floor, and, having done so, turned to place the torch in the socket fastened to the wall. He had hardly lifted his arm, however, before I saw Nikola creep out of the adjoining room. Closer and closer he approached the unsuspecting monk, and then, having measured his distance, with a great spring threw himself upon the man and clutched him by the throat. I pulled his legs from under him, and down he dropped upon the floor, with Nikola's fingers still tightening on his throat. Then, when the sponge had been applied, little by little, his struggles ceased, and presently he lay in Nikola's arms as helpless as if he were dead.

"That is one man accounted for," said Nikola quietly, as he laid the body upon the floor; "now for the others. Slip on this fellow's dress as quickly as you can."

I did as he bade me, and in a few seconds had placed the peculiar black covering over the upper part of my face and head, and was ready to carry out the rest of the scheme. In the face of this excitement I felt as happy as a child; it was the creepy, crawly, supernatural, business that shook my nerve. When it came to straightforward matter-of-fact fighting I was not afraid of anything.

Carrying the money in my hand as we had arranged, I left the room and proceeded up the steps, Nikola following half a dozen yards or so behind me, but keeping in the shadow. Arriving at the gate I rapped upon it with my knuckles, and it was immediately opened. Two men were leaning on either side of it, and as I passed through, I took care that the one on the right should see the money in my hand. As if by accident I dropped it, and it rolled away beyond his feet. Instantly he stooped and made a grab for it. Seeing this I wheeled round upon the other man, and before he could divine my intention had him by the throat. But though I had him at a disadvantage, he proved no easy capture. In stature he must have stood nearly six feet, was broad in proportion, and, like all the men in the place, in most perfect training. However, I held on to him for my life, and presently we were struggling upon the floor. For some strange reason, what I cannot tell, that fight seemed to be the most enjoyable three minutes I have ever spent in the whole of my existence.

Over and over we rolled upon the stone floor, my hand still fixed upon his throat to prevent him from crying out.

At last throwing my leg over him I seated myself upon his chest, and then--having nothing else to do it with--I drew back my right arm, and let him have three blows with the whole strength of my fist.

Written in black and white it looks a trifle bloodthirsty, but you must remember we were fighting for our lives, and if by any chance he gave the alarm, nothing on earth could save us from death. I had therefore to make the most of the only opportunity I possessed of silencing him.

As soon as he was unconscious, I looked round for Nikola. He was kneeling by the body of the other man who was lying, face downwards upon the floor, as if dead.

"I would give five pounds," whispered Nikola, as he rose to his feet, "for this man's skull. Just look at it; it goes up at the back of his head like a tom cat! It is my luck all over to come across such a specimen when I can't make use of it."

As he spoke he ran his first finger and thumb caressingly up and down the man's poll.

"I've got a bottle in my museum in Port Said," he said regretfully, "which would take him beautifully."

Then he picked up the sponge which he had used upon the last man, and went across to my adversary. For thirty seconds or thereabouts he held it upon his nose and mouth; then, throwing it into a corner, divested the man of his garments, and attired himself in them.

"Now," he said, when he had made his toilet to his own satisfaction, "we must be off. They change the guard at midnight, and it is already twenty minutes past eleven."

So saying, he led the way down the corridor, I following at his heels. We had not reached the end of it, however, before Nikola bade me wait for him while he went back. When he rejoined me, I asked him in a whisper what he had been doing.

"Nothing very much," he answered. "I wanted to convince myself as to, a curious malformation of the occipital bone in that man's skull. I am sorry to have kept you waiting, but I might never have had another chance of examining such a complete case."

Having given this explanation, this extraordinary votary of science condescended to continue his escape. Leaving the long corridor, now so familiar to us, we turned to our left hand, ascended a flight of steps, followed another small passage, and then came to a standstill at a spot where four roads met.

"Where on earth are we?" inquired Nikola, looking round him. "This place reminds me of the Hampton Court maze."

“Hark! What is that booming noise?”

We listened, and by doing so discovered that we were near the subterranean waterfall we had seen on the occasion of our first visit to the large cave.

“We are altogether out of our course,” I said.

“On the other hand,” answered Nikola, “we are not close enough to it yet.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“My dear Bruce,” he said, “tell me this: Why are we in this place? Did we not come here to obtain possession of their secrets? Well, as we are saying good-bye to them to-night for good and all, do you suppose, after adventuring so much, I am going empty handed? If you think so, you are very much in error. Why, to do that would be to have failed altogether in our journey; and though Nikola often boasts, you must admit he seldom fails to do what he undertakes. Don’t say any more, but come along with me.”

Turning into a passage on his right, he led the way down some more steps. Here the torches were almost at their last flicker.

“If we don’t look sharp,” said Nikola, “we shall have to carry out our errand in the dark, and that will be undesirable for more reasons than one.”

From the place where we now stood we could hear the roar of the waterfall quite distinctly, and could just make out, further to our left, the entrance to the great cave. To our delight there were no guards to be seen, so we were able to pass in unmolested. Taking what remained of a torch from a socket near the door, we entered together. A more uncanny place than that great cave, as it revealed itself to us by the light of our solitary torch, no man can imagine. Innumerable bats fluttered about the aisles, their wings filling the air with ghostly whisperings, while dominating all was that peculiar charnel-house smell that I had noticed on the occasion of our previous visit, and which no words could properly describe.

“The entrance to the catacombs is at this end,” said Nikola, leading the way up the central aisle. “Let us find it.”

I followed him, and together we made towards that part of the cave furthest from the doors. The entrance once found, we had only to follow the steps, and pass down into the crypt I have before described. By the light of our torch we could discern the swathed-up figures in the niches. Nikola, however, had small attention to spare for them—he was too busily occupied endeavouring to discover the spring in the central pillar to think of anything else. When he found it he pressed it, and the door opened. Then down the ladder we crept into the anteroom where I had waited on that awful night. I can tell you one thing, and it is the sober truth—I would far rather have engaged a dozen of the strongest monks in that monastery single-handed, than have followed my chief into that room. But he would not let me draw back, and so we pushed on together. All around us were the mysterious treasures of the monastery, with every sort of implement for every sort of chemistry known to the fertile brain of man. At the further end was a large wooden door, exquisitely carved. This was padlocked in three places, and looked as if it would offer a stubborn resistance to any one who might attempt to break it. But Nikola was a man hard to beat, and he solved the difficulty in a very simple fashion. Unfastening his loose upper garment, he unstrapped his invaluable medicine-chest, and placed it on the floor; then, choosing a small but sharp surgeon’s saw, he fell to work upon the wood surrounding the staple. In less than ten minutes he had cut out the padlocks, and the door swung open. Then, with all the speed we were masters of, we set to work to hunt for the things we wanted. It contained small phials, antique parchment prescriptions, a thousand sorts of drugs, and finally, in an iron coffer, a small book written in Sanscrit and most quaintly bound. This Nikola stowed away in one of his many voluminous pockets, and, as soon as he had made a selection of the other things, announced that it was time for us to turn back. Just as he came to this conclusion, the torch, which had all the time been burning lower and lower, gave a final flicker, and went out altogether. We were left in the dark in this awful cave.

“This is most unfortunate,” said Nikola. Then, after a pause, “However, as it can’t be cured, we must make the best of it.”

I answered nothing, but waited for my leader to propose some plan. At the end of a few moments the darkness seemed to make little or no difference to Nikola. He took me by the hand, and led me straight through the cave into the ante-chamber.

“Look-out!” he said; “here is the ladder.”

And, true enough, as he spoke my shins made its acquaintance. Strange is the force of habit; the pain was sharp, and

though I was buried in the centre of a mountain, surrounded by the dead men of a dozen centuries, I employed exactly the same epithet to express my feelings as I should have done, had a passing taxi splashed my boots opposite the Mansion House.

Leaving the lower regions, we climbed the ladder, and reached the crypt, passed up the stairs into the great cave, made our way across that, and then, Nikola still leading, found the tunnel, and passed through it as safely as if we had been lighted by a hundred linkmen.

“Our next endeavour must be to discover how we are to get out of the building itself,” said Nikola, as we reached the four cross passages; “and as I have no notion how the land lies, it looks rather more serious. Let us try this passage first.”

As quickly as was possible under the circumstances we made our way up the stairs indicated, passed the great waterfall, sped along two or three corridors, were several times nearly observed, and at last, after innumerable try-backs, reached the great hall where we had been received on the day of our arrival.

Almost at the same instant there was a clamour in the monastery, followed by the ringing of the deep-toned bell; then the shouting of many voices, and the tramping of hundreds of feet.

“They are after us!” said Nikola. “Our flight has been discovered. Now, if we cannot find a way out, we are done for completely.”

The noise was every moment coming closer, and any instant we might expect our pursuers to come into view. Like rats in a strange barn, who hear the approach of a terrier, we dashed this way and that in our endeavours to discover an exit. At last we came upon the steps leading from the great hall into the valley below. Down these we flew as fast as we could go, every moment risking a fall which would inevitably break our necks. Almost too giddy to stand, we at last reached the bottom, to find the door shut, and guarded by a stalwart monk. To throw ourselves upon him was the work of an instant. He lifted his heavy staff, and aimed a blow at me; but I dodged it in time, and got in at him before he could recover. Drawing back my arm, I hit him with all the strength at my command. His head struck the floor with a crash, and he did not move again.

Nikola bent over him, and assured himself that the sleep was genuine. Then he signed to me to give him the key, and when the door was unfastened we passed through it, and closed it after us, locking it on the other side. Then down the valley we ran as fast as our legs would carry us.



CHAPTER 33. The 2ND CONCLUSION

As I have said, we were no sooner through the gates than we took to our heels and fled down the valley for our lives. For my own part I was so thankful to be out of that awful place, to be once more breathing the fresh air of Heaven, that I felt as if I could go on running for ever. Fortunately the night was pitch dark, with a high wind blowing. The darkness prevented our pursuers from seeing the direction we had taken, while the noise of the wind effectually deadened any sound we might make that would otherwise have betrayed our whereabouts.

For upwards of an hour we sped along the bottom of the valley in this fashion, paying no heed where we went and caring for nothing but to put as great a distance as possible between ourselves and our pursuers. At last I could go no further, so I stopped and threw myself upon the ground. Nikola immediately came to a standstill, glanced round him suspiciously, and then sat down beside me.

“So much for our first visit to the great monastery of Thibet,” he said as casually as if he were bidding good-bye to a chance acquaintance.

“Do you think we have given them the slip?” I queried, looking anxiously up the dark valley through which we had come.

“By no means,” he answered. “Remember we are still hemmed in by the precipices, and at most we cannot be more than five miles from their doors. We shall have to proceed very warily for the next week or so, and to do that we must make the most of every minute of darkness.”

We were both silent for a little while. I was occupied trying to recover my breath, Nikola in distributing more comfortably about his person the parchments, etc., he had brought away with him.

“Shall we be going on again?” I asked, as soon as I thought I could go on. “I’ve no desire to fall into their hands, I can assure you. Which way is it to be now?”

“Straight on,” he answered, springing to his feet. “We must follow the valley down and see where it will bring us out. It would be hopeless to attempt to scale the cliffs.”

Without further talk we set off, not to stop again until we had added another four miles or perhaps five to our flight. By this time it was close upon daybreak, the chilliest, dreariest, greyest dawn in all my experience. With the appearance of the light the wind died down, but it still moaned among the rocks and through the high grass in the most dreary and dispiriting fashion. Half an hour later the sun rose, and then Nikola once more called a halt.

“We must hide ourselves somewhere,” he said, “and travel on again as soon as darkness falls. Look about you for a place where we shall not be likely to be seen.”

For some time it seemed as if we should be unable to discover any such spot, but at last we hit upon one that was just suited to our purpose. It was a small enclosure sheltered by big boulders and situated on a rocky plateau high up the hill-side. To this place of refuge we scrambled, and then with armfuls of grass, which we collected from the immediate neighbourhood, endeavoured to make ourselves as comfortable as possible until night should once more descend upon us. It was not a cheery camp. To make matters worse we were quite destitute of food, and already the pangs of hunger were beginning to obtrude themselves upon us.

“If we ever do get back to civilization,” said Nikola, after we had been sitting there some time, “I suppose this business will rank as one of the greatest exploits of your life?”

“I have no desire ever to undertake such another,” I replied truthfully. “This trip has more than satisfied my craving for the adventurous.”

“Wait till you’ve been settled in a sleepy English village for a couple of years,” he said with a laugh. “By that time I wouldn’t mind wagering you’ll be ready for anything that turns up. I wonder what you would think if I told you that, dangerous as this one has been, it is as nothing to another in which I was concerned about six years since. Then I was occupied trying to discover----”

I am sorry to have to confess that it is beyond my power to narrate what his adventure was, where it occurred, or indeed anything connected with it, for while he was talking I fell into a sound sleep, from which I did not wake until nearly

three hours later.

When I opened my eyes the sun was still shining brightly, the wind had dropped, and the air was as quiet as the night had been noisy and tempestuous. I looked round for Nikola, but to my surprise he was not occupying the place where he had been sitting when I fell asleep, nor indeed was he inside the enclosure at all. Alarmed lest anything untoward might have befallen him, I was in the act of going in search of him when he reappeared creeping between the rocks upon his hands and knees. I was about to express my delight at his return, but he signed to me to be silent, and a moment later reached my side.

“Keep as still as you can,” he whispered; “they’re after us.”

“How close are they?” I asked, with a sudden sinking in my heart.

“Not a hundred yards away,” he answered, and as he spoke he bent his head forward to listen.

A moment later I could hear them for myself, coming along the valley to our left. Their voices sounded quite plain and distinct, and for this reason I judged that they could not have been more than fifty yards from us. Now came the great question, Would they discover us or not? Under the influence of the awful suspense I scarcely breathed. One thing I was firmly resolved upon--if they did detect our hiding-place I would fight to the last gasp rather than let them capture me and carry me back to that awful monastery. The sweat stood in great beads upon my forehead as I listened. It was evident they were searching among the rocks at the base of the cliff. Not being able to find us there, would they try higher up? Fortune, however, favoured us. Either they gave us credit for greater speed than we possessed, or they did not notice the hiding-place among the rocks; at any rate, they passed on without molesting us. The change from absolute danger to comparative safety was almost overpowering, and even the stoical Nikola heaved a sigh of relief as the sound of their voices died gradually away.

That night, as soon as it was dark, we left the place where we had hidden ourselves and proceeded down the valley, keeping a watchful eye open for any sign of our foes. But our lucky star was still in the ascendant, and we saw nothing of them. Towards daylight we left the valley and entered a large basin, if it may be so described, formed by a number of lofty hills. On the bottom of the bowl thus fashioned was a considerable village. Halting on an eminence above it, Nikola looked round him.

“We shall have to find a hiding-place on the hills somewhere hereabouts,” he said; “but before we do so we must have food.”

“And a change of dress,” I answered, for it must be remembered that we were still clad in the monkish robes we had worn when we left the monastery.

“Quite so,” he answered: “first the food and the dress, then the hiding-place.”

Without more ado he signed to me to follow him, and together we left the hillock and proceeded towards the village. It was not a large place, nor, from all appearances, was it a very wealthy one; it contained scarcely more than fifty houses, the majority of which were of the usual Thibetan type, that is to say, built of loose stones, roofed with split pine shingles, and as draughty and leaky as it is possible for houses to be. The family reside in one room, the other--for in few cases are there more than two--being occupied by the cows, pigs, dogs, fowls, and other domestic animals.

As we approached the first house Nikola bade me remain where I was while he went forward to see what he could procure. For many reasons I did not care very much about this arrangement, but I knew him too well by this time to waste my breath arguing. He left me and crept forward. It was bitterly cold, and while he was absent and I was standing still, I felt as if I were being frozen into a solid block of ice. What our altitude could have been I am not in a position to tell, but if one could estimate it by the keenness of the air, it must have been something considerable.

Nikola was absent for nearly twenty minutes. At last, however, he returned, bringing with him a quantity of clothing, including two typical Thibetan hats, a couple of thick blankets, and, what was better than all, a quantity of food. The latter consisted of half a dozen coarse cakes, a hunk of a peculiar sort of bread, and a number of new-laid eggs, also a large bowl of milk. As to payment he informed me that he had left a small gold piece, believing that that would be the most effectual means of silencing the owner’s tongue. Seating ourselves in the shelter of a large rock, we set to work to stow away as much of the food as we could possibly consume. Then dividing the clothing into two bundles we set off across the valley in an easterly direction.

By daylight we had put a considerable distance between us and the village, and were installed in a small cave, half-way

up a rugged hill. Below us was a copse of mountain pines and, across the valley, a cliff, not unlike that down which we had climbed to reach the monastery. We had discarded our monkish robes by this time, and, for greater security, had buried them in a safe place beneath a tree. In our new rigs, with the tall felt hats upon our heads, we might very well have passed for typical Thibetans.

Feeling that our present hiding-place was not likely to be discovered, we laid ourselves down to sleep. How long we slumbered, I cannot say; I only know that for some reason or other I woke in a fright to hear a noise in the valley beneath us. I listened for a few moments to make sure, and then shook Nikola, who was still sleeping soundly.

"What is it?" he cried, as he sat up. "Why do you wake me?"

"Because we're in danger again," I answered. "What is that noise in the valley?"

He listened for a moment.

"I can hear nothing," he said.

Then just as he was about to speak again there came a new sound that brought us both to our feet like lightning--*the baying of dogs*. Now, as we both knew, the only dogs in that district are of the formidable Deggi breed, standing about as high as Shetland ponies, as strong as mastiffs, and as fierce as they are powerful. If our enemies were pursuing us with these brutes our case was indeed an unenviable one.

"Get up!" cried Nikola. "They are hunting us down with the dogs. Up the hill for your life!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before we were racing up the hill like hares. Up and up we went, scrambling from rock to rock and bank to bank till my legs felt as if they could go no further. Though it was but little over a hundred yards from our hiding-place into the wood at the summit it seemed like miles. When we reached it we threw ourselves down exhausted upon a bed of pine needles, but only for a minute, then we were up and on our way again as hard as ever. Through the thicket we dashed, conscious of nothing but a desire to get away from those horrible dogs. The wood was a thick one, but prudence told us it could offer no possible refuge for us. Every step we took was leaving a record to guide them, and we dared not hesitate or delay a second longer than was absolutely necessary.

At last we reached the far side of the wood. Here, to our surprise, the country began to slope downwards again into a second valley. From the skirt of the timber where we stood, for nearly a mile, it was all open, with not a bush or a rock to serve as cover. We were in a pretty fix. To wheel round would be to meet our pursuers face to face; to turn to either hand would be equally as bad, while to go on would only be to show ourselves in the open, and after that to be run to earth like foxes in the second valley. But there was no time to stop or to think, so for good or ill we took to our heels again and set off down the slope. We were not half-way across the open, however, before we heard the dogs break cover behind us, and a moment later, the excited shouting of men, who had seen us ahead of them, and were encouraging the hounds to run us down.

If we had run fast before we literally flew now. The dogs were gaining on us at every stride, and unless something unexpected happened to save us we could look upon ourselves in the light of men as good as dead. Only fifty yards separated us from the cover that bounded the moor, if I may so describe it, on the other side. If the worst came to the worst, and we could reach the timber at the bottom, we could climb a tree there and sell our lives as dearly as possible with our revolvers.

Putting on a final spurt we gained the wood and plunged into the undergrowth. The nearest dog--there were three of these gigantic brutes--was scarcely twenty yards behind us. Suddenly Nikola, who was in front, stopped as if shot, threw up his arms and fell straight backwards. Seeing him do this I stopped too, but only just in the nick of time. A moment later I should have been over a precipice into the swift-flowing river that ran below. By the time I realized this the first dog was upon us. Nikola supported himself on his elbow, and, as coolly as if he were picking off a pigeon, shot him dead. The second fell to my share; the third proved somewhat more troublesome. Seeing the fate of his companions, he stopped short and crouched among the bushes, growling savagely.

"Kill him!" cried Nikola, with one of the only signs of excitement I had ever known him show. I fired again, but must have missed him, for he rushed in at me, and had I not thrown up my arm would have seized me by the throat. Then Nikola fired--I felt the bullet whiz past my ear--and before I could think the great beast had fallen back upon the ground and was twisting and twining in his death agony.

"Quick!" cried Nikola, springing to his feet once more. "There's not a moment to be lost. Throw the dogs into the

stream.”

Without wasting time we set to work, and in less than half a minute all three animals had disappeared into the river. As the last went over the side we heard the foremost of our pursuers enter the wood. Another moment and we should have been too late.

“There’s nothing for it,” cried Nikola, “but for us to follow the dogs’ example. They’ll hunt about wondering which way the brutes have gone, and by that time we ought to be some distance down stream.”

“Come on then,” I said, and, without more deliberation, took a header. It was a dive of at least sixty feet, but not so unpleasant as our position would have been upon the bank had we remained. Nikola followed me, and before our enemies could have gained the river side we had swept round the bend and were out of their sight. But though we had for the moment given them the slip our position was still by no means an enviable one. The water was as cold as ice and the current ran like a mill sluice, while the depth could not have been much under fifty feet, though I could only judge this by the shelving of the banks. For nearly ten minutes we swam on side by side in silence. The voices of our pursuers grew more and more faint until we could no longer hear them. The horror of that swim I must leave you to imagine. The icy coldness of the water seemed to eat into the very marrow of my bones, and every moment I expected to feel an attack of cramp. One thing soon became evident, the stream was running more and more swiftly. Suddenly Nikola turned his head and shouted, “Make for the bank!”

I endeavoured to do so, but the whole force of the current was against me. Vainly I battled. The stream bore me further and further from my goal, till at last I was swept beyond the ford and down between two precipitous banks where landing was impossible. It was then that I realized Nikola’s reason for calling to me. For a hundred yards or so ahead I could see the river, then only blue sky and white cloud. For obvious reasons it could not have come to a standstill, so this sudden break-off could have but one meaning--*a fall!* With incredible swiftness the water bore me on, now spinning me round and round like a teetotum, now carrying me this way, now that, but all the time bringing me closer to the abyss.

Ten yards further, and I could hear the sullen boom of the falling waters, and as I heard it I saw that the bank of the fall was studded with a fringe of large rocks. If I did not wish to be hurled over into eternity, I knew I must catch one of these rocks, and cling to it with all my strength. Strange to say, even in that moment of despair, my presence of mind did not desert me. I chose my rock, and concentrated all my energies upon the work of reaching it. Fortunately the current helped me, and with hardly an effort on my part, I was carried towards it. Throwing up my arms I clutched at it, but the stone was slippery, and I missed my hold. I tried again with the same result. Then, just as I was on the very brink of the precipice, my fingers caught in a projecting ledge, and I was able to stay myself. The weight of the water upon my back was terrific, but with the strength of a dozen men I clung on, and little by little lifted myself up. I was fighting for dear life, for Gladys, for all that made life worth living, and that gave me superhuman strength. At last I managed to lift myself sufficiently to get a purchase on the rock with my knees. After that it was all plain sailing, and in less time almost than it takes to tell, I was lying stretched out upon the rock, safe, but exhausted almost to the point of death.

When I had somewhat recovered my strength, I opened my eyes and looked over the edge. Such a sight I never want to see again. Picture a river, as wide as the Thames at London Bridge, walled in between two steep banks, pouring its water down into a rocky pool almost half a mile below. The thunder of the fall was deafening, while from the lake at the foot rose a dense mist, changing, where the sun caught it, to every colour of the rainbow. Fascinated by this truly awful picture, and the narrowness of my own escape from death, I could scarcely withdraw my eyes. When I did it was to look across at the right-hand bank. Nikola stood there waving to me. Cheered by his presence, I began to cast about me for a means of reaching him, but the prospect was by no means a cheerful one. Several rocks there certainly were, and near the bank they were close enough to enable an active man to jump from one to the other. Unfortunately, however, between the one on which I lay and the next was a yawning gulf of something like eight feet. To reach it seemed impossible. I dared not risk the leap, and yet if I did not jump, what was to become of me? I was just beginning to despair again, when I saw Nikola point up stream and disappear.

For something like a quarter of an hour I saw no more of him, then he reappeared a hundred yards or so further up the bank, and as he did so he pointed into mid-stream. I looked, and immediately realized his intention. He had discovered a large log and had sent it afloat in the hope that it would be of service to me. Closer and closer it came, steering directly for where I knelt. As it drew alongside I leant over, and, catching at a small branch which decorated it, attempted to drag it athwart the channel. My strength, however, was uncertain, and had the effect of bringing the current to bear on the other

end. It immediately spun swiftly round, went from me like an express train, and next moment disappeared over the brink into the abyss below, nearly dragging me with it. Once more Nikola signalled to me and disappeared into the wood. Half an hour later another log made its appearance. This time I was more fortunate, and managed, with considerable manoeuvring and coaxing, to get it jammed by the current between the two rocks.

The most perilous part of the whole undertaking was now about to commence. I had to cross on this frail bridge to the next stone. With my heart in my mouth I crawled over my own rock, and then having given a final look round, and tested it as well as I was able, seated myself astride of the log. The rush of the water against my legs was tremendous, and I soon found I should have all my time taken up endeavouring to preserve my balance. But with infinite caution I continued to advance until at last I reached the opposite rock. All the time I had never dared to look over the brink; had I done so I believe my nerve would have deserted me, and I should then have lost my balance and perished for good and all.

When the journey was accomplished, and I was safely established on the second rock, I rested for a few minutes, and then, standing up, measured my distance as carefully as possible, and jumped on to the third. The rest was easy, and in a few moments I was lying quite overcome among the bracken at Nikola's feet. As soon as I was safe, my pluck, presence of mind, nerve, or whatever you like to call it, gave way completely, and I found myself trembling like a little child.

"You have had a narrow escape," said Nikola.

"When I saw that you could not make the bank up yonder, I made up my mind it was all over with you. However, all's well that ends well, and now we've got to find out what we had better do next."

"What do you advise?" I asked, my teeth chattering in my head like castanets.

"That we find a sheltered spot somewhere hereabouts, light a fire and dry our things, then get down to the river below the falls, construct a raft, and travel upon it till we come to a village. There, if possible, we will buy donkeys, and, if all goes well, pursue our journey to the coast by another route."

"But don't you think our enemies will have warned the inhabitants of the villages hereabouts to be on the look-out for us?"

"We must chance that. Now let us find a place to light a fire. You are nearly frozen."

Half a mile or so further on we discovered the spot we wanted, lit our fire and dried our things. All this time I was in agony--one moment as cold as ice, the next in a burning fever. Nikola prescribed for me from his medicine chest, which, with the things he had obtained from the monastery, he still carried with him, and then we laid ourselves down to sleep.

From that time forward I have no recollection of anything that occurred till I woke to find myself snugly ensconced in a comfortable but simply furnished bedroom. Where I was, or how I got there, I could no more tell than I could fly. I endeavoured to get up in order to look out of the window, but I found I was too weak to manage it, so I laid myself down again, and as I did so made another startling discovery--*my pigtail was gone!*

For nearly half an hour I was occupied endeavouring to puzzle this out. Then I heard a footstep in the passage outside, and a moment later a dignified priest entered the room and asked me in French how I felt. I answered that I thought I was much better, though still very weak, and went on to state that I should feel obliged if he would tell me where I was, and how I had got there.

"You are in the French mission at Ya-Chow-Fu," he said. "You were brought here a fortnight ago by an Englishman, who, from what we could gather, had found you higher up the river suffering from a severe attack of rheumatic fever."

"And where is this--this Englishman now?"

"That I cannot say. He left us a week ago to proceed on a botanizing excursion, I believe, further west. When he bade us farewell he gave me a sum of money which I am to devote, as soon as you are fit to move, to chartering a boat and coolies to convey you to I-chang, where you will be able to obtain a steamer for Shanghai."

"And did he not leave any message to say whether I should see him again, and if so, where?"

"I have a note in my pocket for you now." Thus reminded, the worthy priest produced a letter which he handed to me. I opened it as soon as he had departed, and eagerly scanned its contents. It ran as follows:

"Dear Bruce--By the time you receive this I hope you will be on the high road to health again. After your little experiment on the top of the falls you became seriously ill with rheumatic fever. A nice business I had conveying you down stream on a raft, but, as you see, I accomplished it, and got you into the French Mission at Ya-Chow-Fu safely. I am writing

this note to bid you good-bye for the present, as I think it is better we should henceforth travel by different routes. I may, however, run across you in I-chang. One caution before I go--figure for the future as a European, and keep your eyes wide open for treachery. The society has branches everywhere, and by this time I expect they will have been warned. Remember, they will be sure to try to get back the things we've taken, and also will attempt to punish us for our intrusion. I thank you for your companionship, and for the loyalty you have extended to me throughout our journey. I think I am paying you the greatest compliment when I say that I could have wished for no better companion.--Yours,

"Nikola."

That was all.

A week later I bade my hospitable host, who had engaged a boat and trustworthy crew for me, good-bye, and set off on my long down-river journey. I reached I-chang--where I was to abandon my boat and take a passage to Shanghai--safely, and without any further adventure.

On learning that there would not be a river steamer leaving until the following day, I went ashore, discovered an inn, and engaged a room. But though I waited all the evening, and as late as I could next day, Nikola did not put in an appearance. Accordingly at four o'clock I boarded the steamer *Kiang-Yung*, and in due course reached Shanghai.

How thankful I was to again set foot in that place, no one will ever know. I could have gone down on my knees and kissed the very ground in gratitude. Was I not back again in civilization, free to find my sweetheart, and, if she were still of the same mind, to make her my wife? Was not my health thoroughly restored to me? and last, but not least, was there not a sum of £10,000 reposing at my bankers to my credit? That day I determined to see Barkston and McAndrew, and the next to leave for Tientsin in search of my darling. But I was not destined to make the journey after all.

Calling at the club, I inquired for George Barkston. He happened to be in the building and greeted me in the hall with all the surprise imaginable.

"By Jove, Bruce!" he cried. "This is really most wonderful. I was only speaking of you this morning, and here you turn up like----"

"Like a bad penny,' you were going to say."

"Not a bit of it. Like the Wandering Jew would be more to the point. But don't let us stand here. Come along with me. I'm going to take you to my bungalow to tiffin."

"But my dear fellow, I----"

"I know all about that," he cried. "However, you've just got to come along with me. I've got a bit of news for you."

As nothing would induce him to tell me what it was, we chartered 'rickshaws, and set off for his residence.

When we reached it I was ordered to wait in the hall while he went in search of his wife. Having made some inquiries, he led me to the drawing-room, opened the door, and bade me go inside. Though inwardly wondering what all this mystery might mean, I followed his instructions.

A lady was sitting in an easy chair near the window, sewing. *That lady was Gladys!*

"Wilfred!" she cried, jumping to her feet, and turning quite pale, for she could scarcely believe her eyes.

"Gladys!" I answered, taking her in my arms, and kissing her with all the enthusiasm of a long-parted lover.

"I cannot realize it yet," she said, when the first transports were over. "Why did you not let me know you were coming to Shanghai?"

"Because I had no notion that you were here," I answered.

"But did you not call on Mr. Williams in Tientsin? and did he not give you my letter?"

"I have not been to Tientsin, nor have I seen Mr. Williams. I have come straight down the Yangtze-Kiang from the west."

"Oh, I am so glad--so thankful to have you back. We have been separated such a long, long time."

"And you still love me, Gladys?"

"Can you doubt it, dear? I love you more fondly than ever. Does not the warmth of my greeting now convince you of that?"

"Of course it does," I cried. "I only wanted to have the assurance from your own dear lips. But now tell me, how do you

come to be in Shanghai, and in George Barkston's house, of all other places?"

"Well, that would make too long a story to tell *in extenso* just now. We must reserve the bulk of it. Suffice it that my brother and sister have been transferred to a new post in Japan, and while they are getting their house in Tokyo ready, I came down here to stay with Mrs. Barkston, who is an old school friend. I expect them here in about a week's time to fetch me."

"And now the most important of all questions. When are we to be married?"

She hung her pretty head and blushed so sweetly that I had to take her in my arms again and kiss her. I pressed my question, however, and it was finally agreed that we should refer the matter to her brother-in-law on his arrival the following week.

To bring my long story to a close, let me say that we were married three weeks after my return to Shanghai, in the English church, and that we ran across to Japan for our honeymoon. It may be thought that with my marriage my connection with the Chinese nation came to an end. Unfortunately that was not so. Two days after our arrival in Nagasaki two curious incidents occurred that brought in their train a host of unpleasant suspicions. My wife and I had retired to rest for the night, and were both sleeping soundly, when we were awakened by a loud cry of fire. To my horror I discovered that our room was ablaze. I forced the door, and having done so, seized my wife, threw a blanket over her, and made a rush with her outside. How the fire had originated no one could tell, but it was fortunate we were roused in time, otherwise we should certainly have both lost our lives. As it was most of our belongings perished in the flames. A kindly Englishman, resident in the neighbourhood, seeing our plight, took pity on us, and insisted that we should make use of his house until we decided on our future movements. We remained with him for two days, and it was on that following our arrival at his abode that the second circumstance occurred to cause me uneasiness.

We had been out shopping in the morning and returned just in time for tiffin, which when we arrived was already on the table. While we were washing our hands before sitting down to it, our host's little terrier, who was possessed of a thieving disposition, clambered up and helped himself. By the time we returned (the owner of the bungalow, you must understand, lunched at his office, and did not come home till evening) he had eaten half the dish and spoiled the rest. We preferred to make our meal off biscuits and butter rather than call the servants and put them to the trouble of cooking more. An hour later the dog was dead, poisoned, as we should have been had we partaken of the curry. The new cook, who we discovered later was a Chinaman, had meanwhile decamped and could not again be found.

That evening when returning home in the dusk, a knife was thrown from a window across the street, narrowly grazed my throat, and buried itself in the woodwork of the house I was passing at the time. Without more ado I booked two passages aboard a mail steamer and next day set sail with my wife for England.

Arriving in London I took a small furnished house in a quiet part of Kensington, and settled myself down while I looked about me for a small property in the country.

Now to narrate one last surprise before I say good-bye. One afternoon I went up to town to consult a land agent about a place I had seen advertised, and was walking down the Strand, when I felt a hand placed upon my shoulder. I wheeled round to *find myself face to face with Nikola*. He was dressed in frock coat and top hat, but was otherwise the same as ever.

"Dr. Nikola!" I cried in amazement.

"Yes, Dr. Nikola," he answered quietly, without any show of emotion. "Are you glad to see me?"

"Very glad indeed," I replied; "but at first I can hardly believe it. I thought most probably you were still in China."

"China became too hot to hold me," he said with a laugh. "But I shall go out there again as soon as this trouble blows over. In the meantime I am off to St. Petersburg on important business. Where are you staying? and how is your wife?"

"I am staying in Kensington," I replied; "and I am glad to say that my wife is in the best of health."

"I needn't ask if you are happy; your face tells me that. Now can you spare me half an hour?"

"With every pleasure."

"Then come along to Charing Cross; I want to talk to you. This is my taxi."

He led me to a cab which was waiting alongside the pavement, and when I had seated myself in it, stepped in and took his place beside me.

"This is better than Thibet, is it not?" he said, as we drove along.

"Very much better," I answered with a laugh. "But how wonderful it seems that we should be meeting here in this prosaic fashion after all we have been through together. There is one thing I have never been able to understand: what became of you after you left me at Ya-Chow-Fu?"

"I went off on another track to divert the attention of the men who were after us."

"You think we were followed then?"

"I am certain of it, worse luck. And what's more they are after us now. I have had six attempts made upon my life in the last three months. But they have not managed to catch me yet. Why, you will hardly believe it, *but there are two Chinamen following you down the Strand even now*. Dusk has fallen, and you might walk down a side street and thus give them the opportunity they want. That was partly why I picked you up."

"The devil! Then my suspicions were correct after all. The hotel we stayed at in Nagasaki was fired the first night we were in it, a dish of curry intended for us was poisoned two days later, while I was nearly struck with a knife two days after that again. Yesterday I saw a Chinaman near our house in Kensington, but though I thought he appeared to be watching my house I may have been mistaken in his intentions."

"What was he like? Was he dressed in English clothes? and was half his left ear missing?"

"You are describing the man exactly."

"Quong Ma. Then look out. If that gentleman has his eye upon you I should advise you to leave. He'll stick to you like wax until he gets his opportunity, and then he'll strike. Be advised by me, take time by the forelock and clear out of England while you have the chance. They want the things we took, and they want revenge To get both they'll follow us to the ends of the earth."

"And now one very important question: have the things you took proved of sufficient value to repay you for all your trouble and expense?"

"Of more than sufficient value. I'm going to see a French chemist in St. Petersburg about that anaesthetic now. In less than a year I shall enlighten this old country, I think, in a fashion it will not forget. Wait and see!"

As he said this we entered the station-yard, and a minute or so later were standing alongside the Continental express. Time was almost up, and intending passengers were already being warned to take their seats. Nikola saw his baggage placed in the van and then returned to me and held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Bruce," he said. "We shall probably never meet again. You served me well, and I wish you every happiness. One last word of caution, however, beware of that fellow with half an ear, and don't give him a chance to strike. Farewell, and think sometimes of Dr. Nikola!"

I shook hands with him, the guard fluttered his flag, the engine whistled, and the train steamed out of the station. I waved my hand in token of good-bye, and since then I have never heard or seen anything of Dr. Nikola, the most extraordinary man I have ever come in contact with.

When the last carriage was out of sight, I went into the station-yard intending to get a taxi, but when I had beckoned one up a man brushed past me and appropriated it. *To my horror it was the Chinaman with half an ear I had seen outside my house the day before.*

Waiting until he had left the station-yard, I made my way down to the Embankment and took the Underground Railway for Earl's Court, driving home as fast as I could go from there. On the threshold of my residence my servant greeted me with the information that a Chinaman had just called to see me. I waited to hear no more, but packed my things, and within a couple of hours my wife and I had left London for a tiny country town in the Midlands. Here at least we thought we should be safe; but as it turned out we were no more secure there than in London or Nagasaki, for that week the hotel in which we stayed caught fire in the middle of the night, and for the second time since our wedding we only just managed to escape with our lives.

Next day we migrated to a still smaller place in Devonshire, near Torquay. Our enemies still pursued us, however, for we had not been there a month before a most daring burglary was committed in my rooms in broad daylight, and when my wife and I returned from an excursion to a neighbouring village, it was to find our trunks rifled, and our belongings strewn about our rooms. The most extraordinary part of the affair, however, was the fact that nothing, save a small Chinese knife,

was missing.

The county police were soon to the fore, but the only suspicious character they could think of was a certain Celestial with half an ear, who had been observed in the hamlet the day before, and even he could not be discovered when they wanted him.

On hearing that last piece of news I had a consultation with my wife, told her of Nikola's warning, and asked her advice.

As a result we left the hotel, much to the chagrin of the proprietor, that night, and departed for Southampton, where we shipped for New York the following day. Judge of our feelings on reading in an afternoon paper, purchased on board previous to sailing, that the occupants of our bed had been found in the morning with their throats cut from ear to ear.

In New York things became even more dangerous than in England, and four distinct attempts were made upon my life. We accordingly crossed the continent to San Francisco, only to leave it in a hurry three days later for the usual reason.

Where we are now, my dear Craigie, as I said in my Introduction, I cannot even tell *you*. Let me tell you one thing, however, and that is, though we have been here six months, we have seen no more of the half-eared Chinaman, nor indeed any of his sinister race. We live our own lives, and have our own interests, and now that my son is born, we are as happy as any two mortals under similar circumstances can expect to be. I love and honour my wife above all living women, and for that reason, if for no other, I shall never regret the circumstances that brought about my meeting with that extraordinary individual, Dr. Nikola.

Now, old friend, you know my story. It has taken a long time to tell--let us hope that you will think it worth the trouble. If you do, I am amply repaid. Good-bye!



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Chapter 34. INTRODUCTION - MY CHANCE IN LIFE.

LET me begin by explaining that I have set myself the task of telling this story for two sufficient reasons. The first, because I consider that it presents as good a warning to a young fellow as he could anywhere find, against allowing himself to be deluded by a false hatred into committing a sin that at any other time he would consider in every way contemptible and cowardly; and the second, because I think it just possible that it may serve to set others on their guard against one of the most unscrupulous men, if man he is--of which I begin to have my doubts--who ever wore shoe leather. If the first should prove of no avail, I can console myself with the reflection that I have at least done my best, and, at any rate, can have wrought no harm; if the second is not required, well, in that case, I think I shall have satisfactorily proved to my reader, whoever he may be, what a truly lucky man he may consider himself never to have fallen into Dr. Nikola's clutches. What stroke of ill fortune brought me into this fiend's power I suppose I shall never be able to discover. One thing, however, is very certain, that is that I have no sort of desire ever to see or hear of him again. Sometimes when I lie in bed at night, and my dear wife--the truest and noblest woman, I verily believe, who ever came into this world for a man's comfort and consolation--is sleeping by my side, I think of all the curious adventures I have passed through in the last two years, and then fall to wondering how on earth I managed to come out of them alive, to say nothing of doing so with so much happiness as is now my portion. This sort of moralising, however, is not telling my tale; so if you will excuse me, kind reader, I will bring myself to my bearings and plunge into my narrative forthwith.

By way of commencement I must tell you something of myself and my antecedents. My name is Gilbert Pennethorne; my mother was a Tregenna. and if you remember the old adage--"By Tre--, Pol-- and Pen-- You may know the Cornishmen," you will see that I may claim to be Cornish to the backbone.

My father, as far back as I can recollect him, was a highly respectable, but decidedly choleric, gentleman of the old school, who clung to his black silk stock and high-rolled collar long after both had ceased to be the fashion, and for a like reason had for modern innovations much the same hatred as the stagecoachman was supposed to entertain for railway engines. Many were the absurd situations this animosity led him into. Of his six children--two boys and four girls--I was perhaps the least fortunate in his favour. For some reason or another--perhaps because I was the youngest, and my advent into the world had cost my mother her life--he could scarcely bring himself at any time to treat me with ordinary civility. In consequence I never ventured near him unless I was absolutely compelled to do so. I went my way, he went his--and as a result we knew but little of each other, and liked what we saw still less. Looking back upon it now, I can see that mine must have been an extraordinary childhood.

To outsiders my disposition was friendly almost to the borders of demonstrativeness; in my own home, where an equivalent temperament might surely have been looked for, I was morose, quick to take offence, and at times sullen even to brutishness. This my father, to whom opposition of any kind was as hateful as the Reform Bill, met with an equal spirit. Ridicule and carping criticism, for which he had an extraordinary aptitude, became my daily portion, and when these failed to effect their purpose, corporal punishment followed sure and sharp. As a result I detested my home as cordially as I loathed my parent, and was never so happy as when at school--an unnatural feeling, as you will admit, in one so young. From Eton I went up to Oxford, where my former ill luck pursued me. Owing to a misunderstanding I had the misfortune to incur the enmity of my college authorities during my first term, and, in company with two others, was ignominiously "sent down" at the outset of my second year. This was the opportunity my family had been looking for from the moment I was breeched, and they were quick to take advantage of it. My debts were heavy, for I had never felt the obligation to stint myself, and in consequence my father's anger rose in proportion to the swiftness with which the bills arrived. As the result of half an hour's one-sided conversation in the library, with a thunder-shower pattering a melancholy accompaniment upon the window panes, I received a cheque for five thousand pounds with which to meet my University liabilities, an uncomplimentary review of my life, past and present, and a curt announcement that I need never trouble the parental roof with my society in the future. I took him at his word, pocketed the cheque, expressed a hypocritical regret that I had caused him so much anxiety; went up to my room and collected my belongings; then, having bidden my sisters farewell in icy state in the drawing-room, took my seat in the dog-cart, and was driven to the station to catch the express to town. A month

later I was on my way to Australia with a draft for two thousand pounds in my pocket, and the smallest possible notion of what I was going to do with myself when I reached the Antipodes.

In its customary fashion ill luck pursued me from the very moment I set foot on Australian soil. I landed in Melbourne at a particularly unfortunate time, and within a month had lost half my capital in a plausible, but ultimately unprofitable, mining venture. The balance I took with me into the bush, only to lose it there as easily as I had done the first in town. The aspect of affairs then changed completely. The so-called friends I had hitherto made deserted me with but one exception. That one, however, curiously enough the least respectable of the lot, exerted himself on my behalf to such good purpose that he obtained for me the position of storekeeper on a Murrumbidgee sheep station. I embraced the opportunity with alacrity, and for eighteen months continued in the same employment, working with a certain amount of pleasure to myself, and, I believe, some satisfaction to my employers. How long I should have remained there I cannot say, but when the Banyah Creek gold-field was proclaimed, I caught the fever, abandoned my employment, and started off, with my swag upon my back, to try my fortune. This turned out so poorly that less than seven weeks found me desperate, my savings departed, and my claim,—which I must in honesty confess showed but small prospects of success—seized for a debt by a rascally Jew storekeeper upon the Field. A month later a new rush swept away the inhabitants, and Banyah Creek was deserted. Not wishing to be left behind I followed the general inclination, and in something under a fortnight was prostrated at death's door by an attack of fever, to which I should probably have succumbed had it not been for the kindness of a misanthrope of the field, an old miner, Ben Garman by name. This extraordinary individual, who had tried his luck on every gold-field of importance in the five colonies and was as yet as far off making his fortune as when he had first taken a shovel in his hand, found me lying unconscious alongside the creek. He carried me to his tent, and, neglecting his claim, set to work to nurse me back to life again. It was not until I had turned the corner and was convalescent that I discovered the curiosity my benefactor really was. His personal appearance was as peculiar as his mode of life. He was very short, very broad, very red faced, wore a long grey beard, had bristling, white eye-brows, enormous ears, and the largest hands and feet I have ever seen on a human being. Where he had hailed from originally he was unable himself to say. His earliest recollection was playing with another small boy upon the beach of one of the innumerable bays of Sydney harbour; but how he had got there, whether his parents had just emigrated, or whether they had been out long enough for him to have been born in the colony were points of which he pronounced himself entirely ignorant. He detested women, though he could not explain the reason of his antipathy, and there were not two other men upon the field with whom he was on even the barest speaking terms. How it came about that he took such a fancy to me puzzled me then and has continued to do so ever since, for, as far as I could see, save a certain leaning towards the solitary in life, we had not a single bond in common. As it was, however, we were friends without being intimate, and companions by day and night without knowing more than the merest outside rind of each other's lives.

As soon as I was able to get about again I began to wonder what on earth I should do with myself next. I had not a halfpenny in the world, and even on a goldfield it is necessary to eat if one desires to live, and to have the wherewithal to pay if one desires to eat. I therefore placed the matter before my companion and ask his advice. He gave it with his usual candour, and in doing so solved my difficulty for me once and for all.

"Stay with me, lad," he said, "and help me to work the claim. What with the rheumatiz and the lumbago I'm none so spry as I used to be, and there's gold enough in the old shaft yonder to make the fortunes of both of us when once we can get at it."

Naturally I lost no time in closing with his offer, and the following morning found me in the bowels of the earth as hard at work with pick and shovel as my weakness would permit. Unfortunately, however, for our dream of wealth, the mine did not prove as brilliant an investment as its owner had predicted for it, and six week's labour showed us the futility of proceeding further. Accordingly we abandoned it, packed our swags, and set off for a mountain range away to the southward, on prospecting thoughts intent. Finding nothing to suit us there, we migrated into the west, where we tried our hands at a variety of employments for another eighteen months or thereabouts. At length, on the Diamantina River, in Western Queensland, we parted company, myself to take a position of storekeeper on Markapurlie station in the same neighbourhood, and Ben to try his luck on a new field that had just come into existence near the New South Wales border.

For something like three years we neither saw nor heard anything of each other. Whether Ben had succeeded on the field to which he had proceeded when he had said "good-bye" to me, or whether, as usual, he had been left stranded, I could only guess. My own life, on the other hand, was uneventful in the extreme.

From morning till night I kept the station books, served out rations to boundary riders and other station hands, and, in the intervals, thought of my old life, and wondered whether it would ever be my lot to set foot in England again. So far I had been one of Fate's failures, but though I did not know it, I was nearer fortune's money bag than I had ever been in my life before.

The manager of Markapurlie was a man named Bartrand, an upstart and a bully of the first water. He had never taken kindly to me nor I to him. Every possible means that fell in his way of annoying me he employed; and, if the truth must be told, I paid his tyranny back with interest. He seldom spoke save to find fault; I never addressed him except in a tone of contempt which must have been infinitely galling to a man of his suspicious antecedents. That he was only waiting his chance to rid himself of me was as plain as the nose upon his face, and for this very reason I took especial care so to arrange my work that it should always fail to give him the opportunity he desired. The crash, however, was not to be averted, and it came even sooner than I expected.

One hot day, towards the end of summer, I had been out to one of the boundary rider's huts with the month's supply of rations, and, for the reason that I had a long distance to travel, did not reach the station till late in the afternoon. As I drove up to the little cluster of buildings beside the lagoon I noticed a small crowd collected round the store door. Among those present I could distinguish the manager, one of the overseers (a man of Bartrand's own kidney, and therefore his especial crony), two or three of the hands, and as the reason of their presence there, what looked like the body of a man lying upon the ground at their feet. Having handed my horses over to the black boy at the stockyard, I strode across to see what might be going forward. Something in my heart told me I was vitally concerned in it, and bade me be prepared for any emergency.

Reaching the group I glanced at the man upon the ground, and then almost shouted my surprise aloud. He was none other than Ben Garman, but oh, how changed! His once stalwart frame shrunk to half its former size, his face was pinched and haggard to a degree that frightened me, and, as I looked, I knew there could be no doubt about one thing, the man was as ill as a man could well be and yet be called alive.

Pushing the crowd unceremoniously aside, I knelt down and spoke to him. He was mumbling something to himself and evidently did not recognise me.

"Ben," I cried, "Ben, old man, don't you remember Gilbert Pennethorne? Tell me what's wrong with you, old fellow."

But he only rolled his head and muttered something about *"five hundred paces north-west from the creek and just in a line with the blasted gum."*

Realizing that it was quite useless talking to him, and that if I wished to prolong his life I must get him to bed as soon as possible, I requested one of the men standing by to lend a hand and help me to carry him into my hut. This was evidently the chance Bartrand wanted.

"To the devil with such foolery," he cried. "You, Johnstone, stand back and let the man alone. I'll not have him malingering here, I tell you. I know his little game, and yours too, Pennethorne, and I warn you, if you take him into your hut I'll give you the sack that instant, and so you remember what *I* say."

"But you surely don't want the man to die?" I cried, astonished almost beyond the reach of words at his barbarity. "Can't you see how ill he is? Examine him for yourself. He is delirious now, and if he's not looked to he'll be dead in a few hours."

"And a good job too," said the manager brutally. "For my part, I believe he's only shamming. Any way I'm not going to have him doctored here. If he's as ill as you say I'll send him up to the Mail Change, and they can doctor him there. He looks as if he had enough money about him to pay Gibbs his footing."

As Garman was in rags and his condition evidenced the keenest poverty, this sally was treated as a fine joke by the overseer and the understrappers, who roared with laughter, and swore that they had never heard anything better in their lives. It roused my blood, however, to boiling pitch, and I resolved that, come what might, I would not desert my friend.

"If you send him away to the Mail Change," I cried, looking Bartrand square in the eye, "where you hope they won't take him in--and, even if they do, you know they'll not take the trouble to nurse him--you'll be as much a murderer as the man who stabs another to the heart, and so I tell you to your face."

Bartrand came a step closer to me, with his fists clenched and his face showing as white with passion as his tanned skin would permit.

"You call me a murderer, you dog?" he hissed. "Then, by God, I'll act up to what I've been threatening to do these months past and clear you off the place at once. Pack up your traps and make yourself scarce within an hour, or, by the Lord Harry, I'll forget myself and take my boot to you. I've had enough of your fine gentleman airs, my dandy, and I tell you the place will smell sweeter when you're out of it."

I saw his dodge, and understood why he had behaved towards Ben in such a scurvy fashion. But not wanting to let him see that I was upset by his behaviour, I looked him straight in the face as coolly as I knew how and said--

"So you're going to get rid of me because I'm man enough to want to save the life of an old friend, Mr. Bartrand, are you? Well, then, let me tell you that you're a meaner hound than even I took you for, and that is saying a great deal. However, since you wish me to be off I'll go."

"If you don't want to be pitched into the creek yonder you'll go without giving me any more of your lip," he answered. "I tell you I'm standing just about all I can carry now. If we weren't in Australia, but across the water in some countries I've known, you'd have been dangling from that gum tree over yonder by this time."

I paid no attention to this threat, but, still keeping as calm as I possibly could, requested him to inform me if I was to consider myself discharged.

"You bet you are," said he, "and I'll not be happy till I've seen your back on the sand ridge yonder."

"Then," said I, "I'll go without more words. But I'll trouble you for my cheque before I do so. Also for a month's wages in lieu of notice."

Without answering he stepped over Ben's prostrate form and proceeded into the store. I went to my hut and rolled up my swag. This done, I returned to the office, to find them hoisting Ben into the tray buggy which was to take him to the Mail Change, twenty miles distant. The manager stood in the verandah with a cheque in his hand. When I approached he handed it to me with an ill-concealed grin of satisfaction on his face.

"There is your money, and I'll have your receipt," he said. Then, pointing to a heap of harness beyond the verandah rails, he continued, "Your riding saddle is yonder, and also your pack saddles and bridles. I've sent a black boy down for your horses. When they come up you can clear out as fast as you please. If I catch you on the run again look out, that's all."

"I'll not trouble you, never fear," I answered. "I have no desire to see you or Markapurlie again as long as I live. But before I go I've got something to say to you, and I want these men to hear it. I want them to know that I consider you a mean, lying, contemptible murderer. And, what's more, I'm going to let them see me cowhide you within an inch of your rascally life."

I held a long green-hide *quirt* in my hand, and as I spoke I advanced upon him, making it whistle in the air. But surprised as he was at my audacity he was sufficiently quick to frustrate my intention. Rushing in at me he attempted to seize the hand that held the whip, but he did not affect his purpose until I had given him a smart cut with it across the face. Then, seeing that he meant fighting, for I will do him the justice to say that he was no coward, I threw the thong away and gave him battle with my fists. He was not the sort of foe to be taken lightly. The man had a peculiar knack of his own, and, what was more, he was as hard as whalebone and almost as pliable. However he had not the advantage of the training I had had, nor was he as powerful a man. I let him have it straight from the shoulder as often and as hard as he would take it, and three times he measured his full length in the dust. Each time he came up with a fresh mark upon his face, and I can tell you the sight did me good. My blood was thoroughly afire by this time, and the only thing that could cool it was the touch of his face against my fist. At last I caught him on the point of the jaw and he went down all of a heap and lay like a log, just as he had fallen, breathing heavily. The overseer went across to him, and kneeling by his side, lifted his head.

"I believe you've killed him," said he, turning to me with an evil look upon his face.

"Don't you believe it," I answered. "It would have saved the hangman a job if I had, for, you take my word for it, he'll live to be hung yet."

I was right in my first assertion, for in a few moments the manager opened his eyes and looked about him in a dazed fashion. Seeing this I went off to the stock yard and saddled my horses, then, with a last look at the station and my late antagonist, who at that moment was being escorted by the overseer to his own residence, I climbed into my saddle, and, taking the leading rein of the pack horse from the black boy's hand, set off over the sand hills in the direction taken by the cart containing poor Ben.

Reaching the Mail Change--a miserable iron building of four rooms, standing in the centre of a stretch of the dreariest

plain a man could well imagine--I interviewed the proprietor and engaged a room in which to nurse my sick friend back to life. Having done this I put Ben to bed and endeavoured to discover what on earth was the matter with him. At that moment I verily believe I would have given anything I possessed, or should have been likely to possess, for five minutes' conversation with a doctor. I had never seen a case of the kind before, and was hopelessly fogged as to what course I should pursue in treating it. To my thinking it looked like typhoid, and having heard that in such cases milk should be the only diet, I bespoke a goat from the landlord's herd and relegated her to Ben's exclusive use.

My chief prayer for the next month was that it might never be necessary for me to pass through such an awful time again. For three weeks I fought with the disease night and day, one moment cheered by a gleam of hope, the next despairing entirely of success. All the time I was quite aware that I was being spied upon, and that all my sayings and doings were reported to the manager by my landlord when he took over the weekly mail bag. But as I had no desire to hide anything, and nothing, save Ben's progress, to tell, this gave me but the smallest concern. Being no longer in his employ, Bartrand could do me no further mischief, and so long as I paid the extortionate charge demanded by the proprietor of the shanty for board and residence, I knew he would have no fault to find with my presence there.

Somewhere or another I remembered to have read that, in the malady from which I believed my old friend was suffering, on or about the twenty-first day the crisis is reached, and afterwards a change should be observable. My suspicions proved correct, for on that very day Ben became conscious, and after that his condition began perceptibly to improve. For nearly a week, though still as feeble as a month-old child, he mended rapidly. Then, for some mysterious reason he suffered a relapse, lost ground as fast as he had gained it, and on the twelfth day, counting from the one mentioned above, I saw that his case was hopeless, and realised that all my endeavours had been in vain.

How well I remember that miserable afternoon! It had been scorchingly hot ever since sunrise, and the little room in which I watched beside the sick man's bed was like a furnace. From my window I could see the stretch of sunbaked plain rising and falling away towards the horizon in endless monotony. In the adjoining bar I could hear the voices of the landlord and three bushmen who, according to custom, had come over to drink themselves into delirium on their hard-earned savings, and were facilitating the business with all possible despatch. On the bed poor Ben tumbled and tossed, talking wildly to himself and repeating over and over again the same words I had heard him utter that afternoon at Markapurlie--*"five hundred paces north-west from the creek, and just in a line with the blasted gum."* What he meant by it was more than I could tell, but I was soon to discover, and that discovery was destined to bring me as near the pit of damnation as it is possible for a man to get without actually falling into it.

A little before sundown I left the bedroom and went out into the verandah. The heat and the closeness of the sick room had not had a good effect upon me, and I felt wretchedly sick and ill. I sat down on a bench and took in the hopeless view. A quarter of a mile away across the plain a couple of wild turkeys were feeding, at the same time keeping a sharp look-out about them, and on the very edge of the north-eastern horizon a small cloud of dust proclaimed the coming of the mail coach, which I knew had been expected since sunrise that morning. I watched it as it loomed larger and larger, and did not return to my patient until the clumsy, lumbering concern, drawn by five panting horses, had pulled up before the hostelry. It was the driver's custom to pass the night at the Change, and to go on again at daylight the following morning.

When I had seen the horses unharnessed and had spoken to the driver, who was an old friend, I made my way back to Ben's room. To my delight I found him conscious once more. I sat down beside the bed and told him how glad I was to see that his senses had returned to him.

"Ay, old lad," he answered feebly, "I know ye. But I shan't do so for long. I'm done for now, and I know it. This time tomorrow old Ben will know for hisself what truth there is in the yarns the sky-pilots spin us about heaven and hell."

"Don't you believe it, Ben," I answered, feeling that although I agreed with him it was my duty to endeavour to cheer him up. "You're worth a good many dead men yet. You're not going out this trip by a great deal. We shall have you packing your swag for a new rush before you can look round. I'll be helping sink a good shaft inside a month."

"Never again," he answered; "the only shaft I shall ever have anything to do with now will be six by two, and when I'm once down in it I'll never see daylight again."

"Well you're not going to talk any more now. Try and have a nap if you can. Sleep's what you want to bring your strength back."

"I shall have enough and to spare of that directly," he answered. "No, lad, I want to talk to you. I've got something on

my mind that I must say while I've the strength to do it."

But I wouldn't hear him.

"If you don't try to get to sleep," I said, "I shall clear out and leave you. I'll hear what you've got to say later on. There will be plenty of time for that by and bye."

"As you please," he replied resignedly. "It's for you to choose. If you'd only listen, I could tell you what will make you the richest man on earth. If I die without telling you, you'll only have yourself to thank for it. Now do you want me to go to sleep?"

"Yes, I do!" I said, thinking the poor fellow was growing delirious again. "I want you to try more than ever. When you wake up again I'll promise to listen as long as you like."

He did not argue the point any further, but laid his head down on his pillow again, and in a few moments was dozing quietly.

When he woke again the lamp on the rickety deal table near the bed had been lit some time. I had been reading a Sydney paper which I had picked up in the bar, and was quite unprepared for the choking cry with which he attracted my attention. Throwing down the paper I went across to the bed and asked him how he felt.

"Mortal bad," was his answer. "It won't be long now afore I'm gone. Laddie, I must say what I've got to say quickly, and you must listen with all your ears."

"I'll listen, never fear," I replied, hoping that my acquiescence might soothe him. "What is it you have upon your mind? You know I'll do anything I can to help you."

"I know that, laddie. You've been a good friend to me, an' now, please God, I'm going to do a good stroke for you. Help me to sit up a bit."

I lifted him up by placing my arm under his shoulders, and, when I had propped the pillows behind him, took my seat again.

"You remember the time I left you to go and try my luck on that new field down south, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, I went down there and worked like a galley slave for three months, only to come off the field a poorer man than I went on to it. It was never any good, and the whole rush was a fraud. Having found this out I set off by myself from Kalaman Township into the west, thinking I would prospect round a bit before I tackled another place. Leaving the Darling behind me I struck out for the Boolga Ranges, always having had a sort of notion that there was gold in that part of the country if only folk could get at it."

He panted, and for a few moments I thought he would be unable to finish his story. Large beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead, and he gasped for breath, as a fish does when first taken from the water. Then he pulled himself together and continued:

"Well, for three months I lived among those lonely hills, for all the world like a black fellow, never seeing a soul for the whole of that time. You must remember that for what's to come. Gully after gully, and hill after hill I tried, but all in vain. In some places there were prospects, but when I worked at them they never came to anything. But one day, just as I was thinking of turning back, just by chance I struck the right spot. When I sampled it I could hardly believe my eyes. I tell you this, laddie," here his voice sunk to a whisper as he said impressively, "there's gold enough there to set us both up as millionaires a dozen times over."

I looked at him in amazement. Was this delirium? or had he really found what he had averred? I was going to question him, but he held up his hand to me to be silent.

"Don't talk," he said; "I haven't much time left. See that there's nobody at the door."

I crossed and opened the door leading into the main passage of the dwelling. Was it only fancy, or did I really hear someone tip-toeing away? At any rate whether anybody had been eavesdropping or not, the passage was empty enough when I looked into it. Having taken my seat at the bedside again, Ben placed his clammy hand upon my arm and said--

"As soon as I found what I'd got, I covered up all traces of my work and cut across country to find you. I sent you a letter from Thargomindah telling you to chuck up your billet and meet me on the road, but I suppose you never received it?"

I shook my head. If only I had done so what a vast difference it might have made in both our lives.

"Well," continued Ben, with increased difficulty, "as no letter came I made my way west as best I could, to find you. On Cooper's Creek I was taken ill, and a precious hard time I had of it. Every day I was getting worse, and by the time I reached Markapurlie I was done for, as you know."

"But what did you want with me?" I asked, surprised that he should have taken so much trouble to find me when Fortune was staring him in the face.

"I wanted you to stand in with me, lad. I wanted a little capital to start work on, and I reckoned as you'd been so long in one place, you'd probably have saved a bit. Now it's all done for as far as I'm concerned. It seems a bit rough, don't it, that after hunting for the right spot all my life long, I should have found it just when it's no use to me? Howsoever, it's there for you, laddie, and I don't know but what you'll make better use of it than I should have done. Now listen here."

He drew me still closer to him and whispered in my ear--

"As soon as I'm gone make tracks for the Booiga Ranges. Don't waste a minute. You ought to do it in three weeks, travelling across country with good horses. Find the head of the creek, and follow it down till you reach the point where it branches off to the east and leaves the hills. There are three big rocks at the bend, and half a mile or so due south from them there's a big dead gum, struck by lightning, maybe. Step five hundred paces from the rocks up the hillside fair north-west, and that should bring you level with the blasted gum. Here's a bit of paper with it all planned out so that you can't make a mistake."

He pulled out half a sheet of greasy note-paper from his bosom and gave it to me.

"It don't look much there; but you mark my words, it will prove to be the biggest gold-mine on earth, and that's saying a deal! Peg out your claim as soon as you get there, and then apply to Government in the usual way for the Discoverer's Eight. And may you make your fortune out of it for your kindness to a poor old man."

He laid his head back, exhausted with so much talking, and closed his eyes. Nearly half-an-hour went by before he spoke again. Then he said wearily,--

"Laddie, I won't be sorry when it's all over. But still I can't help thinking I would like to have seen that mine."

He died almost on the stroke of midnight, and we buried him next day on the little sandhill at the back of the grog shanty. That I was much affected by the poor old man's decease it would be idle to deny, even if I desired to do so. The old fellow had been a good mate to me, and, as far as I knew, I was the only friend he had in the world. In leaving me his secret, I inherited all he died possessed of. But if that turned out as he had led me to expect it would do, I should, indeed, be a made man. In order, however, to prevent a disappointment that would be too crushing, I determined to place no faith in it. My luck had hitherto been so bad that it seemed impossible it could ever change. To tell the truth, I was feeling far too ill by this time to think much about anything outside myself. During the last few days my appetite had completely vanished, my head ached almost to distraction, and my condition generally betokened the approach of a high fever.

As we left the grave and prepared to return to the house, I reeled. Gibbs, the landlord, put his arm round me to steady me.

"Come, hold up," he said, not unkindly. "Bite on the bullet, my lad. We shall have to doctor you next if this is the way you are going on."

I felt too ill to reply, so I held my tongue and concentrated all my energies on the difficult task of walking home. When I reached the house I was put to bed, and Gibbs and his slatternly wife took it in turns to wait upon me. That night I lost consciousness, and remember nothing further of what happened until I came to my senses, in the same room and bed which had been occupied by Ben, some three weeks later. I was so weak then that I felt more of a desire to die and be done with it, than to continue the fight for existence. But my constitution was an extraordinary one, I suppose, for little by little I regained my strength, until, at the end of six weeks, I was able to leave my bed and hobble into the verandah. All this time the story of Ben's mine had been simmering in my brain. The chart he had given me lay where I had placed it before I was taken ill, namely, in my shirt pocket, and one morning I took it out and studied it carefully. What was it worth? Millions or nothing? But that was a question for the future to decide.

Before putting it back into its hiding place I turned it over and glanced at the back. To my surprise there was a large blot there that I felt prepared to swear had not been upon it when Ben had given it to me. The idea disquieted me exceedingly. I cudgelled my brains to find some explanation for it, but in vain. One thought made me gasp with fright. Had

it been abstracted from my pocket during my illness? If this were so I might be forestalled. I consoled myself, however, with the reflection that, even if it had been examined by strangers, no harm would be done, for beyond the bare points of the compass it contained no description of the place, or where it was situated; only the plan of a creek, a dotted line running five hundred paces north-west and a black spot indicating a blasted gum tree. As Ben had given me my directions in a whisper, I was convinced in my own mind that it was quite impossible for anyone else to share my secret.

A week later I settled my account with Gibbs, and having purchased sufficient stores from him to carry me on my way, saddled my horses and set off across country for the Boolga Ranges. I was still weak, but my strength was daily coming back to me. By the time I reached my destination I felt I should be fit for anything. It was a long and wearisome journey, and it was not until I had been a month on the road that I sighted the range some fifty miles or so ahead of me. The day following I camped about ten miles due north of it, and had the satisfaction of knowing that next morning, all being well, I should be at my destination. By this time the idea of the mine, and the possibility of the riches that awaited me, had grown upon me to such an extent that I could think of nothing else. It occupied my waking thoughts, and was the continual subject of my dreams by night. A thousand times or more, as I made my way south, I planned what I would do with my vast wealth when I should have obtained it, and to such a pitch did this notion at last bring me that the vaguest thought that my journey might after all be fruitless hurt me like positive pain.

That night's camp, so short a distance from my Eldorado, was an extraordinary one. My anxiety was so great that I could not sleep, but spent the greater part of the night tramping about near my fire, watching the eastern heavens and wishing for day. As soon as the first sign of light was in the sky I ran up my horses, saddled them, and without waiting to cook a breakfast, set off for the hills which I could see rising like a faint blue cloud above the tree tops to the south. Little more than half-an-hour's ride from my camp brought me to the creek, which I followed to the spot indicated on the chart. My horses would not travel fast enough to keep pace with my impatience. My heart beat so furiously that I felt as if I should choke, and when I found the course of the stream trending off in a south-easterly direction, I felt as if another hour's suspense must inevitably terminate my existence.

Ahead of me I could see the top of the range rising quite distinctly above the timber, and every moment I expected to burst upon the plain which Ben had described to me. When I did, I almost fell from my saddle in sheer terror. The plain was certainly there, the trend of the river, the rocks and the hillside were just as they had been described to me, but there was one vital difference--the whole place was covered with tents, and alive with men. *The field had been discovered, and now, in all human probability, my claim was gone.* The very thought shook me like the ague. Like a madman I pressed my heels into my horse's sides, crossed the creek and began to climb the hill. Pegged-out claims and a thousand miners, busy as ants in an ant heap, surrounded me on every side. I estimated my five hundred paces from the rocks on the creek bank, and pushed on until I had the blasted gum, mentioned on the chart, bearing due south. Hereabouts, to my despair, the claims were even thicker than before--not an inch of ground was left unoccupied.

Suddenly, straight before me, from a shaft head on the exact spot described by Ben, appeared the face of a man I should have known anywhere in the world--it was the face of my old enemy Bartrand. Directly I saw it the whole miserable truth dawned upon me, and I understood as clearly as daylight how I had been duped.

Springing from my saddle and leaving my animals to stray where they would, I dashed across the intervening space and caught him just as he emerged from the shaft. He recognised me instantly, and turned as pale as death. In my rage I could have strangled him where he stood, as easily as I would have done a chicken.

"Thief and murderer," I cried, beside myself with rage and not heeding who might be standing by. "Give up the mine you have stolen from me. Give up the mine, or, as I live, I'll kill you."

He could not answer, for the reason that my grip upon his throat was throttling him. But the noise he made brought his men to his assistance. By main force they dragged me off, almost foaming at the mouth. For the time being I was a maniac, unconscious of everything save that I wanted to kill the man who had stolen from me the one great chance of my life.

"Come, come, young fellow, easy does it," cried an old miner, who had come up with, the crowd to enquire the reason of the excitement. "What's all this about? What has he done to you?"

Without a second's thought I sprang upon a barrel and addressed them. Speaking with all the eloquence at my command, I first asked them if there was anyone present who remembered me. There was a dead silence for nearly a

minute, then a burly miner standing at the back of the crowd shouted that he did. He had worked a claim next door to mine at Banyan Creek, he said, and was prepared to swear to my identity whenever I might wish him to do so. I asked him if he could tell me the name of my partner on that field, and he instantly answered "Old Ben Garman." My identity and my friendship with Ben having been thus established, I described Ben's arrival at Markapurlie, and Bartrand's treatment of us both. I went on to tell them how I had nursed the old man until he died, and how on his deathbed he had told me of the rich find he had made in the Boolga Ranges. I gave the exact distances, and flourished the chart before their faces so that all might see it. I next described Gibbs as one of Bartrand's tools, and commented upon the ink-stain, on the back of the plan which had aroused my curiosity after my illness. This done, I openly taxed Bartrand with having stolen my secret, and dared him to deny it. As if in confirmation of my accusation, it was then remembered by those present that he had been the first man upon the field, and, moreover, that he had settled on the exact spot marked upon my plan. After this, the crowd began to imagine that there might really be something in the charge I had brought against the fellow. Bartrand, I discovered later, had followed his old Queensland tactics, and by his bullying had made himself objectionable upon the field. For this reason the miners were not prejudiced in his favour.

In the middle of our dispute, and just at the moment when ominous cries of "Lynch him" were beginning to go up, there was a commotion behind us, and presently the Commissioner, accompanied by an escort of troopers, put in an appearance, and enquired the reason of the crowd. Having been informed, the great man beckoned me to him and led me down the hill to the tent, which at that time was used as a Court House. Here I was confronted with Bartrand, and ordered to tell my tale. I did so, making the most I could of the facts at my disposal. The Commissioner listened attentively, and when I had finished turned to Bartrand.

"Where did you receive the information which led you to make your way to this particular spot?" he asked.

"From the same person who gave this man his," coolly replied Bartrand. "If Mr. Pennethorne had given me an opportunity, I would willingly have made this explanation earlier. But on the hill yonder he did all the talking, and I was permitted no chance to get in a word."

"You mean to say then," said the Commissioner in his grave, matter-of-fact way, "that this Ben Garman supplied you with the information that led you to this spot--prior to seeing Mr. Pennethorne."

"That is exactly what I *do* mean," replied Bartrand quickly. "Mr. Pennethorne, who at that time was in my employment as storekeeper upon Markapurlie Station, was out at one of the boundary riders' huts distributing rations when Garman arrived. The latter was feeling very ill, and not knowing how long he might be able to get about, was most anxious to find sufficient capital to test this mine without delay. After enquiry I agreed to invest the money he required, and we had just settled the matter in amicable fashion when he fell upon the ground in a dead faint. Almost at the same instant Mr. Pennethorne put in an appearance and behaved in a most unseemly manner. Unless his motives are revenge, I cannot conceive, your worship, why I should have been set upon in this fashion."

The Commissioner turned to me.

"What have you to say to this?" he asked.

"Only that he lies," I answered furiously. "He lies in every particular. He has been my enemy from the very first moment I set eyes upon him, and I feel as certain as that I am standing before you now, that Ben Garman did not reveal to him his secret. I nursed the old man on his deathbed, and if he had confided his secret to any one he would have been certain to tell me. But he impressed upon me the fact that he had not done so. When he was dead I became seriously ill in my turn, and the information that led to this man's taking up the claim was stolen from me, I feel convinced, while I was in my delirium. The man is a bully and a liar, and not satisfied with that record, he has made himself a thief."

"Hush, hush, my man," said the Commissioner, soothingly. "You must not talk in that way here. Now be off, both of you, let me hear of no quarrelling, and to-morrow I will give my decision."

We bowed and left him, each hating the other like poison, as you may be sure.

Next morning a trooper discovered me camped by the creek, and conducted me to the Commissioner's presence. I found him alone, and when I was ushered in he asked me to sit down.

"Mr. Pennethorne," said he, when the trooper had departed, "I have sent for you to talk to you about the charge you have brought against the proprietor of the 'Wheel of Fortune' mine on the hillside yonder. After mature consideration, I'm afraid I cannot further consider your case. You must see for yourself that you have nothing at all to substantiate the charge

you make beyond your own bald assertion. If, as you say, you have been swindled, yours is indeed a stroke of bad luck, for the mine is a magnificent property; but if, on the other hand--as I must perforce believe, since he was first upon the field--Bartrand's statement is a true one, then I can only think you have acted most unwisely in behaving as you have done. If you will be guided by me, you will let the matter drop. Personally I do not see that you can do anything else. Bartrand evidently received the news before you did, and, as *I* said just now, in proof of that we have the fact that he was first on the field. There is no gainsaying that."

"But I was ill and could not come," I burst out. "I tell you he stole from me the information that enabled him to get here at all."

"Pardon me, I do not know that. And now it only remains for me to ask you to remember that we can have no disturbance here."

"I will make no disturbance," I answered. "You need have no fear of that. If I cannot get possession of my property by fair means I shall try elsewhere."

"That does not concern me," he replied. "Only, I think on the evidence you have at present in your possession you'll be wasting your time and your money. By the way, your name is Gilbert Pennethorne, is it not?"

"Yes," I said, without much interest, "and much good it has ever done me."

"I ask the question because there's an advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* which seems to be addressed to you. Here it is!"

He took up a paper and pointed to a few lines in the "agony" column. When he handed it to me I read the following:--

"If Gilbert Pennethorne, third son of the late Sir Anthony William Pennethorne, Bart., of Polton-Penna, in the County of Cornwall, England, at present believed to be resident in Australia, will apply at the office of Messrs. Grey and Dawkett, solicitors, Maoquarie Street, Sydney, he will hear of something to his advantage."

I looked at the paper in a dazed sort of fashion, and then, having thanked the Commissioner for his kindness, withdrew. In less than two hours I was on my way to Sydney to interview Messrs. Grey and Dawkett. On arriving I discovered their office, and when I had established my identity, learned from them that my father had died suddenly while out hunting, six months before, and that by his will I had benefited to the extent of five thousand pounds sterling.

Three days later the excitement and bitter disappointment through which I had lately passed brought on a relapse of my old illness, and for nearly a fortnight I hovered between life and death in the Sydney Hospital. When I left that charitable institution it was to learn that Bartrand was the sole possessor of what was considered the richest gold mine in the world, and that he, after putting it into the hands of reliable officers, had left Australia for London.

As soon as I was quite strong again I packed up my traps, and, with the lust of murder in my heart, booked a passage in a P. and O. liner, and followed him.



CHAPTER 35. ENGLAND ONCE MORE.

WHEN I reached England, the icy hand of winter was upon the land. The streets were banked feet high with snow, and the Thames at London Bridge was nothing but a mass of floating ice upon which an active man could have passed from shore to shore. Poor homeless wretches were to be seen sheltering themselves in every nook and cranny, and the morning papers teemed with gruesome descriptions of dead bodies found in drifts, of damage done to property, and of trains delayed and snowed up in every conceivable part of the country. Such a winter had not been experienced for years, and when I arrived and realised what it meant for myself, I could not but comment on my madness in having left an Australian summer to participate in such a direful state of things.

Immediately on arrival I made my way to Blankerton's Hotel, off the Strand, and installed myself there. It was a nice, quiet place, and suited me admirably. The voyage home from Australia had done me a world of good--that is to say as far as my bodily health was concerned--but it was doubtful whether it had relieved my brain of any of the pressure recent events in Australia had placed upon it. Though nearly three months had elapsed since my terrible disappointment in the Boolga Ranges, I had not been able to reconcile myself to it; and as the monotonous existence on board ship allowed me more leisure, it probably induced me to brood upon it more than I should otherwise have done. At any rate, my first thought on reaching London was that I was in the same city with my enemy, and my second to wonder how I could best get even with him. All day and all night this idea held possession of my brain. I could think of nothing but my hatred of the man, and as often as I saw his name mentioned in the columns of the Press, the more vehement my desire to punish him became. Looking back on it now it seems to me that *I* could not have been quite right in my head at that time, though to all intents and purposes I was as rational a being as ever stepped in shoe leather. In proof of what I mean, I can remember, times out of number, talking sensibly and calmly enough in the smoking room, and then going upstairs to my bedroom and leaning out of my window, from which a glimpse of the Strand was obtainable, to watch the constant stream of passers by and to wonder if Bartrand were among the number. I would imagine myself meeting him and enticing him into one of those dark passages leading from the gas-lit thoroughfare, and then, when I had revealed my identity, drawing a knife from my sleeve and stabbing him to his treacherous heart. On another occasion I spent hours concocting a most ingenious plan for luring him on to the Embankment late at night, and arranging that my steps to my hotel, feeling about as miserable as it would be possible for a man to be. What did life contain for me now? I asked myself this question for the hundredth time, as *I* walked up the sombre street; and the answer was, *Nothing*--absolutely nothing. By judiciously investing the amount I had inherited under my father's will I had secured to myself an income approaching two hundred pounds a year, but beyond that I had not a penny in the world. I had been sick to death of Australia for some years before I had thought of leaving it, and my last great disappointment had not furnished me with any desire to return to it. On the other hand I had seen too much of the world to be able to settle down to an office life in England, and my enfeebled constitution, even had I desired to do so, would have effectively debarred me from enlisting in the Army. What, therefore, was to become of me--for I could not entertain the prospect of settling down to a sort of vegetable existence on my small income--I could not see. "Oh, if only I had not been taken ill after Ben's death," I said to myself again and again; "what might I not then have done?" As it was, that scoundrel Bartrand had made millions out of what was really my property, and as a result I was a genteel pauper without a hope of any sort in the world. As the recollection of my disappointment came into my mind, I ground my teeth and cursed him; and for the rest of my walk occupied myself thinking of the different ways in which I might compass his destruction, and at the same time hating myself for lacking the necessary pluck to put any one of them into execution.

As I reached the entrance to my hotel a paper boy came round the corner crying his wares.

"Ere yer are, sir; 'orrible murder in the West End," he said, running to meet me; and, wanting something to occupy me until breakfast should be ready, I bought a copy and went in and seated myself by the hall fire to read it. On the second page was a column with the following headline, in large type:--

"SHOCKING TRAGEDY IN THE WEST END." Feeling in the humour for this sort of literature, I began to read. The details were as follows:--

"It is our unfortunate duty to convey to the world this morning the details of a ghastly tragedy which occurred last night in the West End. The victim was Major-General Charles Brackington, the well-known M.P. for Pollingworth, whose

speech on the Short Service Extension Bill only last week created such a sensation among military men. So far the whole affair is shrouded in mystery, but, it is believed, the police are in possession of a clue which will ultimately assist them in their identification of the assassin. From inquiries made we learn that Major-General Brackington last night visited the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in company with his wife and daughter, and having escorted them to Chester Square, where his residence is situated, drove back to the Veteran Club, of which he is one of the oldest and most distinguished members. There he remained in conversation with some brother officers until a quarter past twelve o'clock, when he hailed a passing hansom and bade the man drive him home. This order was given in the hearing of one of the Club servants, whose evidence should prove of importance later on. From the time he left the Club until half-past one o'clock nothing more was seen of the unfortunate gentleman. Then Police-Sergeant Maccinochie, while passing along Piccadilly, discovered a man lying in the centre of the road almost opposite the gates of the Royal Academy. Calling the constable on the beat to his assistance, he carried the body to the nearest gas lamp and examined it. To his horror he recognised Major-General Brackington, with whose features he was well acquainted. Life, however, was extinct. Though convinced of this fact, he nevertheless obtained a cab and drove straightway to Charing Cross Hospital, where his suspicions were confirmed. One singular circumstance was then discovered--with the exception of the left eyebrow, which had been cut completely away, evidently with some exceedingly sharp instrument, there was not a wound of any sort or description upon the body. Death, so the medical authorities asserted, had been caused by an overdose of some anaesthetic, though how administered it was impossible to say. The police are now engaged endeavouring to discover the cabman, whom it is stated, the Club servant feels sure he can identify."

With a feeling of interest, for which I could not at all account, seeing that both the victim and the cabman, whom the police seemed determined to associate with the crime, were quite unknown to me, I re-read the paragraph, and then went in to breakfast. While I was eating I turned the page of the paper, and propping it against the cruet stand, scanned the fashionable intelligence. Sandwiched in between the news of the betrothal of the eldest son of a duke, and the demise of a well-known actress, was a paragraph which stirred me to the depths of my being. It ran as follows:--

"It is stated on reliable authority that Mr. Richard Bartrand, the well-known Australian millionaire, has purchased from the executors of the late Earl of Mount Chennington the magnificent property known as Chennington Castle in Shropshire, including several farms, with excellent fishing and shooting."

* * * * *

I crushed the paper up and threw it angrily away from me. So he was going to pose as a county magnate, was he--this swindler and liar!--and upon the wealth he has filched from me? If he had been before me then, I think I could have found it in my heart to kill him where he stood, regardless of the consequences.

After breakfast I went for another walk, this time in a westerly direction. As I passed along the crowded pavements I thought of the bad luck which had attended me all my life. From the moment I entered the world nothing seemed to have prospered that I had taken in hand. As a boy I was notorious for my ill-luck at games; as a man good fortune was always conspicuously absent from my business ventures; and when at last a chance for making up for it did come in my way, success was stolen from me just as I was about to grasp it.

Turning into Pall Mall, I made my way in the direction of St. James's Street, intending to turn thence into Piccadilly. As I passed the Minerva Club the door swung open, and to my astonishment my eldest brother, who had succeeded to the baronetcy and estates on my father's death, came down the steps. That he recognised me there could be no doubt. He could not have helped seeing me even if he had wished to do so, and for a moment, I felt certain, he did not know what to do. He and I had never been on good terms, and when I realised that, in spite of my many years' absence from home, he was not inclined to offer me a welcome, I made as if I would pass on. He, however, hastened after me, and caught me before I could turn the corner.

"Gilbert," he said, holding out his hand, but speaking without either emotion or surprise, "this is very unexpected. I had no notion you were in England. How long is it since you arrived?"

"I reached London yesterday," I answered, with a corresponding coolness, as I took his hand. For, as I have said, there was that in his face which betrayed no pleasure at seeing me.

He was silent for half a minute or so, and I could see that he was wondering how he could best get rid of me.

"You have heard of our father's death, I suppose?" he said at last.

"I learnt the news in Sydney," I replied. "I have also received the five thousand pounds he left me."

He made no comment upon the smallness of the amount in proportion to the large sums received by himself and the rest of the family, nor did he refer in any other way to our parent's decease. Any one watching us might have been excused had they taken us for casual acquaintances, so cool and distant were we with one another. Presently I enquired, for politeness sake, after his wife, who was the daughter of the Marquis of Belgravia, and whom I had, so far, never seen.

"Ethelberta unfortunately is not very well at present," he answered. "Sir James Peckleton has ordered her complete rest and quiet, and I regret, for that reason, I shall not be able to see as much of you as I otherwise should have hoped to do. Is it your intention to remain very long in England?"

"I have no notion," I replied, truthfully. "I maybe here a week--a year--or for the rest of my life. But you need not be afraid, I shall not force my society upon you. From your cordial welcome home, I gather that the less you see of me the more you will appreciate the relationship we bear to one another. Good morning."

Without more words I turned upon my heel and strolled on down the street, leaving him looking very uncomfortable upon the pavement. There and then I registered a vow that, come what might, I would have no more to do with my own family.

Leaving Pall Mall behind me, I turned up St. James's Street and made my way into Piccadilly. In spite of the slippery roads, the streets were well filled with carriages, and almost opposite Burlington House I noticed a stylish brougham drawn up beside the footpath. Just as I reached it the owner left the shop before which it was standing, and crossed the pavement towards it. Notwithstanding the expensive fur coat he wore, the highly polished top hat, and his stylish appearance generally, I knew him at once *for Bartrand, my greatest enemy on earth*. He did not see me, for which I could not help feeling thankful; but I had seen him, and the remembrance of his face haunted me for the rest of my walk. The brougham, the horses, even the obsequious servants, should have been mine. I was the just, lawful owner of them all.

After dinner that evening I was sitting in the smoking room looking into the fire and, as usual, brooding over my unfortunate career, when an elderly gentleman, seated in an armchair opposite me, laid his paper on his knee and addressed me.

"It's a very strange thing about these murders," he said, shaking his head. "I don't understand it at all. Major-General Brackington last night, and now Lord Beryworth this morning."

"Do you mean to say there has been another murder of the same kind to-day?" I enquired, with a little shudder as I thought how nearly his subject coincided with the idea in my own head.

"I do," he answered. "The facts of the case are as follows:--At eleven o'clock this morning the peer in question, who, you must remember, was for many years Governor of one of our Australian capitals, walked down the Strand in company with the Duke of Garth and Sir Charles Mandervan. Reaching Norfolk Street he bade his friends 'good-bye,' and left them. From that time until a quarter past one o'clock, when some children went in to play in Dahlia Court, Camden Town, and found the body of an elderly gentleman lying upon the ground in a peculiar position, he was not seen again. Frightened at their discovery, the youngsters ran out and informed the policeman on the beat, who returned with them to the spot indicated. When he got there he discovered that life had been extinct for some time."

"But what reason have the authorities for connecting this case with that of Major-General Brackington?"

"Well, in the first place, on account of the similarity in the victims' ranks; and in the second, because the same extraordinary anaesthetic seems to have been the agent in both cases; and thirdly, for the reason that the same peculiar mutilation was practised. When Lord Beryworth was found, his left eyebrow had been cut completely away. Strange, is it not?"

"Horrible, I call it," I answered with a shudder. "It is to be hoped the police will soon run the murderer to earth."

If I had only known what I do now I wonder if I should have uttered that sentiment with so much fervour? I very much doubt it.

The following evening, for some reason or another, certainly not any desire for enjoyment, I visited a theatre. The name or nature of the piece performed I cannot now remember. I only know that I sat in the pit, in the front row, somewhere about the middle, and that I was so hemmed in by the time the curtain went up, that I could not move hand or foot. After the little introductory piece was finished the more expensive parts of the house began to fill, and I watched with a bitter sort of envy the gaiety and enjoyment of those before me. My own life seemed one perpetually unpleasant dream,

in which I had to watch the happiness of the world and yet take no share in it myself. But unhappy as I thought myself then, my cup of sorrow was as yet far from being full. Fate had arranged that it should be filled to overflowing, and that I should drink it to the very dregs.

Five minutes before the curtain rose on the play of the evening, there was a stir in one of the principal boxes on the prompt side of the side of the house, and a moment later two ladies and three gentlemen entered. Who the ladies, and two of the gentlemen were I had no notion; the third man, however, I had no difficulty in recognising, he was Bartrand. As I saw him a tremour ran through me, and every inch of my body quivered under the intensity of my emotion. For the rest of the evening I paid no attention to the play, but sat watching my enemy, and writhing with fury every time he stooped to speak to those with whom he sat, or to glance superciliously round the house. On his shirt front he wore an enormous diamond, which sparkled and glittered like an evil eye. So much did it fascinate me that I could not withdraw my eyes from it, and as I watched I felt my hands twitching to be about its owner's throat.

When the play came to an end, and the audience began to file out of the theatre into the street, I hastened to the front to see my enemy emerge. He was standing on the steps, with his friends, putting on his gloves, while he waited for his carriage to come up. I remained in the crowd, and watched him as a cat watches a bird. Presently a magnificent landau, drawn by the same beautiful pair of thoroughbred horses I had seen in the morning, drew up before the portico. The footman opened the door, and the man I hated with such a deadly fervour escorted his friends across the pavement and, having placed them inside, got in himself. As the vehicle rolled away the bitterest curse my brain could frame followed it. Oh, if only I could have found some way of revenging myself upon him, how gladly I would have seized upon it.

Leaving the theatre I strolled down the street, not caring very much where I went. A little snow was falling, and the air was bitterly cold. I passed along the Strand, and not feeling at all like bed, turned off to my left hand, and made my way towards Oxford Street. I was still thinking of Bartrand, and it seemed to me that, as I thought, my hatred became more and more intense. The very idea of living in the same city with him, of breathing the same air, of seeing the same sights and meeting the same people was hideously repulsive to me. I wanted him out of the world, but I wanted to do the deed myself, to punish him with my own hand; I wanted to see him lying before me with his sightless eyes turned up to the skies, and his blood crimsoning the snow, and to be able to assure myself that at last he was dead, and that I, the man he had wronged, had killed him. What would it matter? Supposing I were hung for his murder! To have punished him would surely have been worth that. At any rate I should have been content.

When I reached Oxford Street I again turned to my left hand, and walked along the pavement as far as the Tottenham Court Road, thence down the Charing Cross Road into Shaftesbury Avenue. By this time the snow was falling thick and fast. Poor homeless wretches were crouched in every sheltered corner, and once a tall man, thin and ragged as a scarecrow, rose from a doorway, where he had been huddled up beside a woman, and hurried after me.

"Kind gentleman," he said in a voice that at any other time could not have failed to touch my heart, "for the love of God, I implore you to help me. I am starving, and so is my wife in the doorway yonder. We are dying of cold and hunger. We have not touched bite or sup for nearly forty-eight hours, and unless you can spare us the price of a night's lodging and a little food I assure you she will not see morning."

I stopped and faced him.

"What will you do for it?" I asked, with a note in my voice that frightened even myself. "I must have a bargain. If I give you money, what will you do for it?"

"Anything," the poor wretch replied. "Give me money, and I swear I will do anything you may like to ask me."

"Anything?" I cried. "That is a large word. Will you commit murder?"

I looked fixedly at him, and under the intensity of my gaze he half shrunk away from me.

"Murder?" he echoed faintly.

"Murder? Yes, murder," I cried, hysterically. "I want murder done. Nothing else will satisfy me. Kill me the man I'll show you, and you shall have all you want. Are you prepared to do so much to save your life?"

He wrung his hands and moaned. Then he pulled himself together.

"Yes, I'll do anything," he answered hoarsely. "Give me the money; let me have food first."

As he spoke his wife rose from the doorstep, and came swiftly across the snow towards us. She must have been a fine-looking woman in her day; now her face, with its ghastly, lead-coloured complexion and dark, staring eyes was

indescribably horrible. On her head she wore the ruins of a fashionable bonnet.

"Come away!" she cried, seizing the man fiercely by the arm. "Can't you see that you are talking to the Devil, and that he's luring your soul to hell? Come away, my husband, I say, and leave him! If we are to die, let us do it here in the clean snow like honest folk, not on the scaffold with ropes round our necks. There is your answer, Devil!"

As she said this she raised her right hand and struck me a blow full and fair upon the mouth. I felt the blood trickle down my lip.

"Take that, Devil," she shouted; "and now take your temptations elsewhere, for you've met your match here."

As if I were really the person she alluded to, I picked up my heels and ran down the street as hard as I could go, not heeding where I went, but only conscious that at last I had spoken my evil thoughts aloud. Was I awake, or was I dreaming? It all seemed like some horrible nightmare, and yet I could feel the hard pavement under my feet, and my face was cold as ice under the cutting wind.

Just as I reached Piccadilly Circus a clock somewhere in the neighbourhood struck *one*. Then it dawned upon me that I had been walking for two hours. I stood for a moment by the big fountain, and then crossed the road, and was about to make my way down the continuation of Regent Street into Waterloo Place, when I heard the shrill sound of a policeman's whistle. Almost immediately I saw an officer on the other side of the road dash down the pavement. I followed him, intent upon finding out what had occasioned the call for assistance. Bound into Jermyn Street sped the man ahead of me, and close at his heels I followed. For something like three minutes we continued our headlong career, and it was not until we had reached Bury Street that we sounded a halt. Here we discovered a group of men standing on the pavement watching another man, who was kneeling beside a body upon the ground. He was examining it with the assistance of his lantern.

"What's the matter, mate?" inquired the officer whom I had followed from Piccadilly. "What have you got there?"

"A chap I found lying in the road yonder," replied the policeman upon his knees. "Have a look at him, and then be off for a stretcher. I fancy he's dead; but, anyway, we'd best get him to the hospital as soon as maybe."

My guide knelt down, and turned his light full upon the victim's face. I peered over his shoulder in company with the other bystanders. The face we saw before us was the countenance of a gentleman, and also of a well-to-do member of society. He was clothed in evening dress, over which he wore a heavy and expensive fur coat. An opera hat lay in the gutter, where it had probably been blown by the wind, and an umbrella marked the spot where the body had been found in the centre of the street. As far as could be gathered without examining it, there was no sign of blood about the corpse; one thing, however, was painfully evident--*the left eyebrow had been severed from the face in toto*. From the cleanness of the cut the operation must have been performed with an exceedingly sharp instrument.

A more weird and ghastly sight than that snow-covered pavement, with the flakes falling thick and fast upon it, the greasy road, the oilskinned policemen, the curious bystanders, and the silent figure on the ground, could scarcely be imagined. I watched until the man I had followed returned with an ambulance stretcher, and then accompanied the mournful *cortege* a hundred yards or so on its way to the hospital. Then, being tired of the matter, I branched off the track, and prepared to make my way back to my hotel as fast as my legs would take me.

My thoughts were oppressed with what I had seen. There was a grim fascination about the recollection of the incident that haunted me continually, and which I could not dispel, try how I would. I pictured Bartrand lying in the snow exactly as I had seen the other, and fancied myself coming up and finding him. At that moment I was passing Charing Cross Railway Station. With the exception of a policeman sauntering slowly along on the other side of the street, a drunken man staggering in the road, and a hansom cab approaching us from Trafalgar Square, I had the street to myself. London slept while the snow fell, and murder was being done in her public thoroughfares. The hansom came closer, and for some inscrutable reason I found myself beginning to take a personal interest in it. This interest became even greater when, with a spluttering and sliding of feet, the horse came to a sudden standstill alongside the footpath where I stood. Next moment a man attired in a thick cloak threw open the apron and sprang out.

"Mr. Pennethorne, I believe?" he said, stopping me, and at the same time raising his hat.

"That is my name," I answered shortly, wondering how he knew me and what on earth he wanted. "What can I do for you?"

He signed to his driver to go, and then, turning to me, said, at the same time placing his gloved hand upon my arm in a confidential way:

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance. May I have the pleasure of walking a little way with you? I should be glad of your society, and I can then tell you my business."

His voice was soft and musical, and he spoke with a peculiar languor that was not without its charm. But as I could not understand what he wanted with me, I put the question to him as plainly as I could without being absolutely rude, and awaited his answer. He gave utterance to a queer little laugh before he replied:

"I want the pleasure of your company at supper for one thing," he said. "And I want to be allowed to help you in a certain matter in which you are vitally interested, for another. The two taken together should, I think, induce you to give me your attention."

"But I don't know you," I blurted out. "To the best of my belief I have never set eyes on you before. What business, therefore, can you have with me?"

"You shall know all in good time," he answered. "In the meantime let me introduce myself. My name is Nikola. I am a doctor by profession, a scientist by choice. I have few friends in London, but those I have are the best that a man could desire. I spend my life in the way that pleases me most; that is to say, in the study of human nature. I have been watching you since you arrived in England, and have come to the conclusion that you are a man after my own heart. If you will sup with me as I propose, I don't doubt but that we shall agree admirably, and what is more to the point, perhaps, we shall be able to do each other services of inestimable value. I may say candidly that it lies in your power to furnish me with something I am in search of. I, on my part, will, in all probability, be able to put in your way what you most desire in the world."

I stopped in my walk and faced him. Owing to the broad brim of his hat, and the high collar of his cape, I could scarcely see his face. But his eyes rivetted my attention at once.

"And that is?" I said.

"Revenge," he answered, simply. "Believe me, my dear Mr. Pennethorne, I am perfectly acquainted with your story. You have been wronged; you desire to avenge yourself upon your enemy. It is a very natural wish, and if you will sup with me as I propose, I don't doubt but that I can put the power you seek into your hands. Do you agree?"

All my scruples vanished before that magic word *revenge*, and, strange as it may seem, without more ado I consented to his proposal. He walked into the road and, taking a whistle from his pocket, blew three *staccato* notes upon it. A moment later the hansom from which he had jumped to accost me appeared round a corner and came rapidly towards us. When it pulled up at the kerb, and the apron had been opened, this peculiar individual invited me to take my place in it, which I immediately did. He followed my example, and sat down beside me, and then, without any direction to the driver, we set off up the street.

For upwards of half-an-hour we drove on without stopping, but in which direction we were proceeding I could not for the life of me discover. The wheels were rubber-tyred and made no noise upon the snow-strewn road; my companion scarcely spoke, and the only sound to be heard was the peculiar bumping noise made by the springs, the soft *pad-pad* of the horse's hoofs, and an occasional grunt of encouragement from the driver. At last it became evident that we were approaching our destination. The horse's pace slackened; I detected the sharp ring of his shoes on a paved crossing, and presently we passed under an archway and came to a standstill.

"Here we are at last, Mr. Pennethorne," said my mysterious conductor. "Allow me to lift the glass and open the apron."

He did so, and then we alighted. To my surprise we stood in a square courtyard, surrounded on all sides by lofty buildings. Behind the cab was a large archway, and at the further end of it the gate through which we had evidently entered. The houses were in total darkness, but the light of the cab lamps was sufficient to show me a door standing open on my left hand.

"I'm afraid you must be very cold, Mr. Pennethorne," said Nikola, for by that name I shall henceforth call him, as he alighted, "but if you will follow me I think I can promise that you shall soon be as warm as toast."

As he spoke he led the way across the courtyard towards the door I have just mentioned. When he reached it he struck a match and advanced into the building. The passage was a narrow one, and from its appearance, and that of the place generally, I surmised that the building had once been used as a factory of some kind. Half-way down the passage a narrow wooden staircase led up to the second floor, and in Indian file we ascended it. On reaching the first landing my guide opened a door which stood opposite him, and immediately a bright light illumined the passage.

"Enter, Mr. Pennethorne, and let me make you welcome to my poor abode," said Nikola, placing his hand upon my shoulder and gently pushing me before him.

I complied with his request, half expecting to find the room poorly furnished. To my surprise, however, it was as luxuriously appointed as any I had ever seen. At least a dozen valuable pictures--I presume they must have been valuable, though personally I know but little about such things--decorated the walls; a large and quaintly-carved cabinet stood in one corner and held a multitude of china vases, bowls, plates, and other knick-knacks; a massive oak sideboard occupied a space along one wall and supported a quantity of silver plate; while the corresponding space upon the opposite wall was filled by a bookcase reaching to within a few inches of the ceiling, and crammed with works of every sort and description. A heavy pile carpet, so soft that our movements made no sound upon it, covered the floor; luxurious chairs and couches were scattered about here and there, while in an alcove at the farther end was an ingenious apparatus for conducting chemical researches. Supper was laid on the table in the centre, and when we had warmed ourselves at the fire that glowed in the grate, we sat down to it. As if to add still further to my surprise, when the silver covers of the dishes were lifted, everything was found to be smoking hot. How this had been managed I could not tell, for our arrival at that particular moment could not have been foretold with any chance of certainty, and *I* had seen no servant enter the room. But I was very hungry, and as the supper before me was the best *I* had sat down to for years, you may suppose I was but little inclined to waste time on a matter of such trivial importance.

When we had finished and I had imbibed the better part of two bottles of Heidseck, which my host had assiduously pressed upon me, we left the table and ensconced ourselves in chairs on either side of the hearth. Then, for the first time, I was able to take thorough stock of my companion. He was a man of perhaps a little above middle height, broad shouldered, but slimly built. His elegant proportions, however, gave but a small idea of the enormous strength I afterwards discovered him to possess. His hair and eyes were black as night, his complexion was a dark olive hue, confirming that suspicion of foreign extraction which his name suggested, but of which his speech afforded no trace. He was attired in faultless evening dress, the dark colour of which heightened the extraordinary pallor of his complexion.

"You have a queer home here, Dr. Nikola!" I said, as I accepted the cheroot he offered me.

"Perhaps it is a little out of the common," he answered, with one of his queer smiles; "but then that is easily accounted for. Unlike the general run of human beings, I am not gregarious. In other words, I am very much averse to what is called the society of my fellow man; I prefer, under most circumstances, to live alone. At times, of course, that is not possible. But the idea of living in a flat, shall we say, with perhaps a couple of families above me, as many on either side, and the same number below; or in an hotel or a boarding-house, in which I am compelled to eat my meals in company with half-a-hundred total strangers, is absolutely repulsive to me. I cannot bear it, and therefore I choose my abode elsewhere. A private dwelling-house I might, of course, take, but that would necessitate servants and other incumbrances; this building suits my purposes admirably. As you may have noticed, it was once a boot and shoe factory; but after the proprietor committed suicide by cutting his throat--which, by the way, he did in this very room--the business failed; and until I fell across it, it was supposed to be haunted, and, in consequence, has remained untenanted."

"But do you mean to say you live here alone?" I enquired, surprised at the queerness of the idea.

"In a certain sense, yes--in another, no. That is, I have a deaf and dumb Chinese servant who attends to my simple wants, and a cat who for years has never left me."

"You surprise me more and more!"

"And why? Considering that I know China better than you know that part of London situated, shall we say, between Blackfriars Bridge and Charing Cross, and have spent many years of my life here, the first should not astonish you. And as I am warmly attached to my cat, who has accompanied me in all my wanderings about the globe, I cannot see that you should be surprised at the other. Perhaps you would like to see both?"

As may be supposed, I jumped eagerly at the opportunity; and upon my saying so, Nikola pressed a knob in the wall at his side. He had hardly taken his finger away before my ear detected the shuffling of feet in the passage outside. Next moment the door opened, and in walked the most hideous man I have ever yet beheld in my life. In Australia I had met many queer specimens of the Chinese race, but never one whose countenance approached in repulsiveness that of the man Nikola employed as his servant. In stature he was taller than his master, possibly a couple or three inches above six feet, and broad in proportion. His eyes squinted inwardly, his face was wrinkled and seamed in every direction, his nose had

plainly been slit at some time or another, and I noticed that his left ear was missing from his head. He was dressed in his native costume, but when he turned round I noticed that his pigtail had been shorn off at the roots.

"You are evidently puzzled about something," said Nikola, who had been watching my face.

"I must confess I am," I answered. "It is this. If he is deaf and dumb, as you say, how did he hear the bell you rang, and also how do you communicate your orders to him?"

"This knob," replied Nikola, placing his finger on the bell-push, "releases a smaller shutter and reveals a disc that signifies that I desire his services. When I wish to give him instructions I speak to him in his own language, and he answers it. It is very simple."

"But you said just now that he is deaf and dumb," I cried, thinking I had caught him in an equivocation. "If so, how can he hear or speak?"

"So he is," replied my host, looking at me as he spoke, with an amused smile upon his face. "Quite deaf and dumb."

"Then how can you make him hear. And how does he reply?"

"As I say, by word of mouth. Allow me to explain. You argue that because the poor fellow has no tongue wherewith to speak, and his ears are incapable of hearing what you say to him, that it is impossible for him to carry on a conversation. So far as your meaning goes, you are right. But you must remember that, while no sound can come from his lips, it is still possible for the words to be framed. In that case our eyes take the place of our ears, and thus the difficulty is solved. The principle is a simple one, and a visit to any modern deaf and dumb school in London will show you its efficacy. Surely you are not going to ask me to believe you have not heard of the system before?"

"Of course I have heard of it," I answered, "but in this case the circumstances are so different."

"Simply because the man is a Chinaman--that is all. If his skin were white instead of yellow, and he wore English dress and parted his hair in the middle, you would find nothing extraordinary in it. At any rate, perpetual silence on the part of a servant and physical inability to tittle-tattle of the affairs one would wish kept a secret, is a luxury few men can boast."

"I agree with you; but how did the poor fellow come to lose his faculties?"

"To let you into that secret would necessitate the narration of a long and, I fear to you, uninteresting story. Suffice that he was the confidential servant of the Viceroy of Kweichow until he was detected in an amiable plot to assassinate his master with poisoned rice. He was at once condemned to die by *ling-chi* or the death of a thousand cuts, but by the exercise of a little influence which, fortunately for him, I was able to bring to bear, I managed to get him off."

"I wonder you care to have a man capable of concocting such a plot about you," I said.

"And why? Because the poor devil desired to kill the man he hated, is it certain that he should wish to terminate the existence of his benefactor, for whom he has a great affection? Moreover, he is a really good cook, understands my likes and dislikes, never grumbles, and is quite conscious that if he left me he would never get another situation in the world. In the nineteenth century, when good servants are so difficult to procure, the man is worth a gold mine--a Wheel of Fortune, if you like."

"You would argue, then," I said, disregarding the latter part of his speech, "that if a man hates another he is justified in endeavouring to rid the world of him?"

"Necessarily it must depend entirely on the circumstances of the case," replied Nikola, leaning back in his chair and steadfastly regarding me. "When a man attempts to do, or succeeds in doing, me an injury, I invariably repay him in his own coin. Presume, for instance, that a man were to rob you of what you loved best, and considered most worth having, in the world--the affection of your wife, shall we say?--in that case, if you were a man of spirit you would feel justified in meting out to him the punishment he deserved, either in the shape of a duel, or severe personal chastisement. If he shot at you in any country but England, you would shoot at him. Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, was the old Hebrew law, and whatever may be said against it, fundamentally it was a just one."

I thought of Bartrand, and wished I could apply the principle to him.

"I fear, however," continued Nikola, after a moment's pause, "that in personal matters the men of the present day are not so brave as they once were. They shelter themselves too much behind the law of the land. A man slanders you; instead of thrashing him you bring an action against him for libel, and claim damages in money. A man runs away with your wife; you proclaim your shame in open court, and take gold from your enemy for the affront he has put upon your honour. If a

man thrashes you in a public place, you don't strike him back; on the contrary, you consult your solicitor, and take your case before a magistrate, who binds him over to keep the peace. If, after all is said and done, you look closely into the matter, what is crime? A very pliable term, I fancy. For instance, a duke may commit an offence, and escape scot free, when, for the same thing, only under a different name, a costermonger would be sent to gaol for five years. And *vice versa*. A subaltern in a crack regiment may run up tailors' bills--or any others, for that matter--for several thousands of pounds and decamp without paying a halfpenny of the money, never having intended to do so from the very beginning, while if a chimney sweep were to purloin a bunch of radishes from a tray outside a greengrocer's window, he would probably be sent to gaol for three months. And yet both are stealing, though I must confess society regards them with very different eyes. Let clergymen and other righteous men say what they will, the world in its heart rather admires the man who has the pluck to swindle, but he must do so on a big scale, and he must do so successfully, or he must pay the penalty of failure. Your own case, with which, as I said earlier, I am quite familiar, is one in point. Everyone who has heard of it, and who knows anything of the man, feels certain that Bartrand stole from you the information which has made him the millionaire he is. But does it make any difference in the world's treatment of him? None whatever. And why? Because he swindled successfully. In the same way they regard you as a very poor sort of fellow for submitting to his injustice."

"Curse him!"

"Exactly. But, you see, the fact remains. Bartrand has a house in Park Lane and a castle in Shropshire. The Duke of Glendower dined with him the night before last, and one of the members of the Cabinet will do so on Saturday next. Yesterday he purchased a racing stable and a stud, for which he paid twenty thousand pounds cash; while I am told that next year he intends building a yacht that shall be the finest craft of her class in British waters. It is settled that he is to be presented at the next levee, and already he is in the first swim of the fashionable world. If he can only win the Derby this year, there is nothing he might not aspire to. In ten years, if his money lasts and he is still alive, he will be a peer of the realm and founding a new family."

"He *must not* live as long. Oh, if I could only meet him face to face and repay him for his treachery!"

"And why not? What is there to prevent you? You can walk to his house any morning and ask to see him. If you give the butler a fictitious name and a tip he will admit you. Then, when you get into the library, you can state your grievance and, having done so, shoot him dead."

I uttered a little involuntary cry of anger. Deeply as I hated the man, it was not possible for me seriously to contemplate murdering him in cold blood. Besides--no, no; such a scheme could not be thought of for a moment.

"You don't like the idea?" said Nikola, with that easy *nonchalance* which characterised him. "Well, I don't wonder at it; it's *bizarre*, to say the least of it. You would probably be caught and hanged, and hanging is an inartistic termination to the career of even an unsuccessful man. Besides, in that case, *you* would have lost your money and your life; he only his life, so that the balance would still be in his favour. No; what you want is something a little more subtle, a little more artistic. You want a scheme that will enable you to put him out of the way, and, at the same time, one that will place you in possession of the money that is really yours. Therefore it must be done without any *esclandre*. Now I don't doubt you would be surprised if I were to tell you that in the event of his death you would find yourself his sole heir."

"His sole heir?" I cried. "You must be mad to say such a thing."

"With due respect, no more mad than you are," said this extraordinary man. I have seen the will for myself--never mind how I managed it--and I know that what I say is correct. After all, it is very feasible. The man, for the reason that he has wronged you, hates you like poison, and while he lives you may be sure you will never see a penny of his fortune. But he is also superstitious, and believing, as he does, that he stands a chance of eternal punishment for swindling you as he did, he is going to endeavour to obtain a mitigation of his sentence by leaving you at his death what he has not been able to spend during his lifetime. If you die first, so much the worse for him; but I imagine he is willing to risk that."

I rose from my chair, this time thoroughly angered.

"Dr. Nikola," I said, "this is a subject upon which I feel very deeply. I have no desire to jest about it."

"I am not jesting, my friend, I assure you," returned Nikola, and, as he said so, he went to an escritoire in the corner. "In proof that what I say is the truth, here is a rough draft of his will, made yesterday. You are at liberty to peruse it if you care to do so, and as you are familiar with his writing, you can judge for yourself of its worth."

I took the paper from his hand and sat down with it in my chair again. It certainly was what he had described, and in it

I was named as sole and undivided heir to all his vast wealth. As I read, my anger rose higher and higher. From this paper it was evident that the man knew he had swindled me, and it was also apparent that he was resolved to enjoy the fruits of his villainy throughout his life, and to leave me what he could not use when he died, and when I would, in all human probability, be too old to enjoy it. I glanced at the paper again, and then handed it back to Nikola, and waited for him to speak. He watched me attentively for a few seconds, and then said in a voice so soft and low that I could scarcely hear it--

"You see, if Bartrand were to be removed after he had signed that you would benefit at once."

I did not answer. Nikola waited for a few moments and then continued in the same low tone--

"You hate the man. He has wronged you deeply. He stole your secret while you were not in a position to defend yourself, and I think he would have killed you had he dared to do so. Now he is enjoying the fortune which should be yours. He is one of the richest men in the world--with your money. He has made himself a name in England, even in this short space of time--with your money. He is already a patron of sport, of the drama, and of art of every sort--with your money. If you attempt to dispute his possession, he will crush you like a worm. Now the question for your consideration is: Do you hate him sufficiently to take advantage of an opportunity to kill him if one should come in your way?"

He had roused my hate to such a pitch that before I could control myself I had hissed out "Yes!" He heard it, and when I was about to protest that I did not mean it, held up his hand to me to be silent.

"Listen to me," he said. "I tell you candidly that it is in my power to help you. If you really wish to rid yourself of this man, I can arrange it for you in such a way that it will be impossible for any one to suspect you. The chance of detection is absolutely *nil*. You will be as safe from the law as you are at this minute. And remember this, when you have rid yourself of him, his wealth will be yours to enjoy just as you please. Think of his money --think of the power it gives, think of the delight of knowing that you have punished the man who has wronged you so shamefully. Are you prepared to risk so much?"

My God! I can remember the horror of that moment even now. As I write these words I seem to feel again the throbbing of the pulses in my temples, the wild turmoil in my brain, the whirling mist before my eyes. In extenuation, I can only hope that I was, for the time being, insane. Shameful as it may be to say so, I know that while Nikola was speaking, I hungered for that man's death as a starving cur craves for food.

"I don't want his money," I cried, as if in some small extenuation of the unutterable shame of my decision. "I only want to punish him--to be revenged upon him."

"You consent, then?" he said quietly, pulling his chair a little closer, and looking at me in a strange fashion.

As his eyes met mine all my own will seemed to leave me. I was powerless to say anything but "Yes, I consent."

Nikola rose to his feet instantly, and with an alertness that surprised me after his previous langour.

"Very good," he said; "now that that is settled, we can get to business. If you will listen attentively, I will explain exactly how it is to be done."



CHAPTER 36. A GRUESOME TALE.

“THERE are three things to be borne in mind,” said Nikola, when *I* had recovered myself a little: “the first is the dependent point, namely, that the man has to be, well, shall we call it, relieved of the responsibility of his existence! Secondly, the deed must be done at once; and, thirdly, it must be accomplished in such a manner that no suspicion is aroused against you. Now, to you who know the world, and England in particular, *I* need scarcely explain that there are very few ways in which this can be done. *If* you desire to follow the melodramatic course, you will decoy your enemy to an empty house and stab him there; in that case, however, there will, in all probability, be a tramp taking refuge in the coal cellar who will overhear you, the marks of blood on the floor will give evidence against you, and--what will be worse than all--there will be the body to dispose of. *It* that procedure does not meet with your approval, you might follow him about night after night until you find an opportunity of effecting your purpose in some deserted thoroughfare; but then you must take into consideration the fact that there will always be the chance of his calling out, or in other ways attracting the attention of the neighbourhood, or of someone coming round the corner before you have quite finished. A railway train has been tried repeatedly, but never with success; for there is an increased difficulty in getting rid of the body, while porters and ticket collectors have a peculiar memory for faces, and history shows that whatever care you may take you are bound to be discovered sooner or later. In his own house the man is as secure, or more so, than he would be in the Tower of London; and even if you did manage to reach him there, the betting would be something like a million to one that you would be detected. No; none of these things are worthy of our consideration. I came to this conclusion in another and similar case in which my assistance was invoked three months ago. If one wants to succeed in murder, as in anything else, one must endeavour to be original.”

“For heaven’s sake, man, choose your words less carefully!” I cried, with a sudden fierceness for which I could not afterwards account. “You talk as if we were discussing an ordinary business transaction.”

“And are we not?” he replied calmly, paying no attention to my outburst of temper. “I am inclined to think we are. You desire to revenge yourself upon a man who has wronged you. For a consideration I find you the means of doing it. You want--I supply. Surely supply and demand constitute the component parts of an ordinary business transaction?”

“You said nothing just now about a consideration. What is it to be?”

“We will discuss that directly.”

“No, not directly. Now! I must know everything before I hear more of your plans.”

“By all means let us discuss it then. Properly speaking, I suppose I should demand your soul as my price, and write the bond with a pen dipped in your blood. But, though you may doubt it, I am not Mephistopheles. My terms are fifty thousand pounds, to be paid down within six months of your coming in to your money. I think you will admit that that is a small enough sum to charge for helping a man to obtain possession of nearly two millions. I don’t doubt our friend Bartrand would pay three times as much to be allowed to remain on in Park Lane. What do you think?”

The mere mention of Bartrand’s name roused me again to fury.

“You shall have the money,” I cried. “And much good may it do you. Come what may, I will not touch a penny of it myself. I want to punish him, not to get his fortune. Now what is your scheme?”

“Pardon me, one thing at a time if you please.”

He crossed to the *escritoire* standing in the corner of the room, and from a drawer took a sheet of paper. Having glanced at it he brought it to me with a pen and ink.

“Read it, and when you have done so, sign. We will then proceed to business.”

I glanced at it, and discovered that it was a legally drawn up promise to pay Dr. Antonio Nikola fifty thousand pounds within six months of my succeeding to the property of Richard Bartrand, of Park Lane, London, and Chennington Castle, Shropshire, should such an event ever occur. Dipping the pen into the ink I signed what he had written, and then waited for him to continue. He folded up the paper with great deliberation, returned it to its place in the *escritoire*, and then seated himself opposite me again.

“Now I am with you hand and glove,” he said with a faint smile upon his sallow face. “Listen to my arrangement. In

considering the question of murder I have thought of houses, trains, street stabbings, poisonings, burnings, drowning, shipwreck, dynamite, and even electricity; and from practical experience I have arrived at the conclusion that the only sure way in which you can rid yourself of an enemy is to do the deed in a hansom cab."

"A hansom cab?" I cried. "You must be mad. How can that be safe at all?"

"Believe me, it is not only the safest, but has been proved to be the most successful. I will explain more fully, then you will be able to judge of the beautiful simplicity of my plan for yourself. The cab I have constructed myself after weeks of labour, in this very house; it is downstairs now; if you will accompany me we will go and see it."

He rose from his chair, took up the lamp that stood upon the table, and signed to me to follow him. I did so, down the stairs by which he had ascended, and along the passage to a large room at the rear of the building. Folding doors opened from it into the yard, and, standing in the centre of this barn-like apartment, its shafts resting on an iron trestle, was, a hansom cab of the latest pattern, fitted with all the most up-to-date improvements.

"Examine it," said Nikola, "and I think you will be compelled to admit that it is as beautiful a vehicle as any man could wish to ride in; get inside and try it for yourself."

While he held the lamp aloft I climbed in and seated myself upon the soft cushions. The inside was lined with Russia leather, and was in every way exquisitely fitted. A curious electric lamp of rather a cumbersome pattern, I thought, was fixed on the back in such a position as to be well above the rider's head. A match-box furnished the bottom of one window, and a cigar-cutter the other; the panels on either side of the apron were decorated with mirrors; the wheels were rubber tyred, and each of the windows had small blinds of heavy stamped leather. Altogether it was most comfortable and complete.

"What do you think of it?" said Nikola, when I had finished my scrutiny.

"It's exactly like any other hansom," I answered. "Except that it is finished in a more expensive style than the average cab, I don't see any difference at all."

"There you refer to its chief charm," replied Nikola, with a grim chuckle. "If it *were* different in any way to the ordinary hansom, detection would be easy. As it is I am prepared to defy even an expert to discover the mechanism without pulling it to pieces."

"What is the mechanism, then, and what purpose does it serve?"

"I will explain."

He placed the lamp he held in his hand upon a bracket on the wall, and then approached the vehicle.

"In the first place examine these cushions," he said, pointing to the interior. "You have doubtless remarked their softness. If you study them closely you will observe that they are pneumatic. The only difference is that the air used is the strongest anaesthetic known to science. The glass in front, as you will observe now that I have lowered it, fits into a slot in the apron when the latter is closed, and thus, by a simple process, the interior becomes air-tight. When this has been done the driver has but to press this knob, which at first sight would appear to be part of the nickel rein-support, and a valve opens on either side of the interior--in the match-box in the right window, in the cigar-cutter in the left; the gas escapes, fills the cab, and the result is--well, I will leave you to imagine the result for yourself."

"And then?" I muttered hoarsely, scarcely able to speak distinctly, so overcome was I by the horrible exactness and ingenuity of this murderous affair.

"Then the driver places his foot upon this treadle, which, you see, is made to look as if it works the iron support that upholds the vehicle when resting, the seat immediately revolves and the bottom turns over, thus allowing the body to drop through on to the road. Its very simplicity is its charm. Having carried out your plan you have but to find a deserted street, drive along it, depress the lever, and be rid of your fare when and where you please. By that time he will be far past calling out, and you can drive quietly home, conscious that your work is accomplished. Now what do you think of my invention?"

For a few moments I did not answer, but sat upon an upturned box close by, my head buried in my hands.

The agony of that minute no man will ever understand. Shame for myself for listening, loathing of my demoniacal companion for tempting me, hatred of Bertrand, and desire for revenge, all struggled within me for the mastery. I could scarcely breathe; the air of that hateful room seemed to suffocate me. At last I rose to my feet, and as I did so another burst of fury seized me.

“Monster! Murderer!” I cried, turning like a madman on Nikola, who was testing the appliances of his awful invention with a smile of quiet satisfaction on his face. “Let me go, I will not succumb to your temptations. Show me the way out of this house, or I will kill you.”

Sobs shook my being to its very core. A violent fit of hysteria had seized me, and under its influence I was not responsible for what I said or did.

Nikola turned from the cab as calmly as if it had been an ordinary hansom which he was examining with a view to purchase, and, concentrating his gaze upon me as he spoke, said quietly:

“My dear Pennethorne, you are exciting yourself. Pray endeavour to be calm. Believe me, there is nothing to be gained by talking in that eccentric fashion. Sit down again and pull yourself together.”

As I looked into his face all my strength seemed to go from me. Without a second’s hesitation I sat down as he commanded me, and stared in a stupid, dazed fashion at the floor. I no longer had any will of my own. Of course I can see now that he had hypnotised me; but his methods must have been more deadly than I have ever seen exercised before, for he did not insist upon my looking into his eyes for any length of time, nor did he make any passes before my face as I had seen professional mesmerists do. He simply glanced at me--perhaps a little more fixedly than usual--and all my will was immediately taken from me. When I was calm he spoke again.

“You are better now,” he said, “so we can talk. You must pay particular attention to what I am going to say, and what I tell you to do you will do to the letter. To begin with, you will now go back to your hotel, and, as soon as you reach it, go to bed. You will sleep without waking till four o’clock this afternoon; then you will dress and go for a walk. During that walk you will think of the man who has wronged you, and the more you think of him the fiercer your hatred for him will become. At six o’clock you will return to your hotel and dine, going to sleep again in the smoking-room till ten. When the clock has struck you will wake, take a hansom, and drive to 23, Great Gunter Street, Soho. Arriving at the house, you will ask for Levi Solomon, to whom you will be at once conducted. He will look after you until I can communicate with you again. That is your programme for the day. I order you not to fail in any single particular of it. Now you had better be off. It is nearly six o’clock.”

I rose from my seat and followed him out into the passage like a dog; thence we made our way into the yard. To my surprise a cab was standing waiting for us, the lamps glaring like fierce eyes into the dark archway which led into the street.

“Get in,” said Nikola, opening the apron. “My man will drive you to your hotel. On no account give him a gratuity, for I do not countenance it, and he knows my principle. Good night.”

I obeyed him mechanically, still without emotion, and when I was seated the cab drove out into the street.

Throughout the journey back to the hotel I sat in the corner trying to think, and not succeeding. I was only conscious that, whatever happened, I must obey Nikola in all he had told me to do. Nothing else seemed of any importance.

On approaching my residence, I wondered how I should obtain admittance; but, as it turned out, that proved an easy matter, for when I arrived the servants were already up and about, and the front door stood open. Disregarding the stare of astonishment with which I was greeted, I went upstairs to my room, and in less than ten minutes was in bed and fast asleep.

Strangely enough, considering the excitement of the previous twenty-four hours, my sleep was dreamless. It seemed only a few minutes from the time I closed my eyes till I was awake again, yet the hands of my watch had stood at half-past six a.m. when I went to bed, and when I opened my eyes again they chronicled four o’clock exactly. So far I had fulfilled Nikola’s instructions to the letter. Without hesitation I rose from my bed, dressed myself carefully, and when I was ready, donned my overcoat and went out for a walk.

The evening was bitterly cold, and heavy snow was falling. To keep myself warm I hurried along, and as I went I found my thoughts reverting continually to Bartrand. I remembered my life at Markapurlie, and the cat-and-dog existence I had passed there with him. Then the memory of poor old Ben’s arrival at the station came back to me as distinctly as if it had been but yesterday, and with its coming the manager’s brutality roused me afresh. I thought of the fight we had had, and then of the long weeks of nursing at the wretched Mail Change on the plains. In my mind’s eye I seemed to see poor old Ben sitting up in bed telling me his secret, and when I was once more convalescent, went over, day by day, my journey to the Boolga Ranges, and dreamt again the dreams of wealth that had occupied my brain then, only to find myself robbed of

my fortune at the end. Now the man who had stolen my chance in life was one of the richest men in England. He had in his possession all that is popularly supposed to make life worth the living, and while he entertained royalty, bought racehorses and yachts, and enjoyed every advantage in life at my expense, left me to get along as best I might. I might die of starvation in the gutter for all he would care. At that moment I was passing a newsagent's stall. On a board before the door, setting forth the contents of an evening newspaper, was a line that brought me up all standing with surprise, as the sailors say. "*Bartrand's Generosity.--A Gift to the People,*" it ran. I went inside, bought a copy of the paper, and stood in the light of the doorway to read the paragraph. It was as follows:--

"Mr. Richard Bartrand, the well-known Australian millionaire, has, so we are informed, written to the London County Council offering to make a free gift to the city of that large area of ground recently occupied by Montgomery House, of which he has lately become the possessor. The donor makes but one stipulation, and that is that it shall be converted into public gardens, and shall be known in the future as Bartrand Park. As the ground in question was purchased at auction by the millionaire last week for the large sum of fifty thousand pounds, the generosity of this gift cannot be overestimated."

To the surprise of the newsagent I crushed the paper up, threw it on the ground, and rushed from the shop in a blind rage. What right had he to pose as a public benefactor, who was only a swindler and a robber? What right had he to make gifts of fifty thousand pounds to the people, when it was only by his villainy he had obtained the money? But ah! I chuckled to myself, before many hours were over I should be even with him, and then we would see what would happen. A hatred more intense, more bitter, than I could ever have believed one man could entertain for another, filled my breast. Under its influence all my scruples vanished, and I wanted nothing but to cry quits with my enemy.

For more than half an hour I hurried along, scarcely heeding where I went, thinking only of my hatred, and gloating over the hideous revenge I was about to take. That I was doing all this under Nikola's hypnotic influence I now feel certain; but at the time I seemed to be acting on my own initiative, and Nikola to be only playing the part of the *deus ex machina*.

At last I began to weary of my walk, so, hailing a hansom, I directed the driver to convey me back to my hotel. As I passed through the hall the clock over the billiard-room door struck six, and on hearing it I became aware that in one other particular I had fulfilled Nikola's orders. After dinner I went into the smoking-room, and, seating myself in an easy chair before the fire, lit a cigar. Before I had half smoked it I was fast asleep, dreaming that I was once more in Australia and tossing on a bed of sickness in the Mail Change at Markapurlie. A more vivid dream it would be impossible to imagine. I saw myself, pale and haggard, lying upon the bed, unconscious of what was passing around me. I saw Bartrand and Gibbs standing looking down at me. Then the former came closer, and bent over me. Next moment he had taken a paper from the pocket of my shirt, and carried it with him into the adjoining bar. A few minutes later he returned with it and replaced it in the pocket. As he did so he turned to the landlord, who stood watching him from the doorway, and said--"You're sure he's delirious, that he's not shamming?"

"Shamming? Poor beggar," answered Gibbs, who after all was not such a bad fellow at heart. "Take a good look at him and see for yourself. I hope I may never be as near gone as he is now."

"So much the better," said Bartrand with a sneer, as he stepped away from the bed. "We'll save him the trouble of making us his legatees."

"You don't mean to steal the poor beggar's secret, surely?" replied Gibbs. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought that."

"More fool you then," said Bartrand. "Of course I'm not going to *steal* it, only to borrow it. Such chances don't come twice in a lifetime. But are you sure of your facts? Are you certain the old fellow said there was gold enough there to make both of them millionaires half-a-dozen times over?"

"As certain as I'm sitting here," answered Gibbs.

"Very good; then I'm off to-night for the Boolga Ranges. In ten days I'll have the matter settled, and by the time that dog there gets on to his feet again we'll both be on the high road to fortune."

"And I'm only to have a quarter of what you get? It's not fair, Bartrand."

Bartrand stepped up to him with that nasty, bullying look on his face that I knew so well of old.

"Look here, my friend," he said, "You know Richard Bartrand, don't you? And you also know what I can tell about you. I offer you a fourth of the mine for your information, but I don't give it to you for the reason that I'm afraid of you, for I'm not. Remember I know enough of your doings in this grog shanty to hang you a dozen times over; and, by the Lord Harry, if you make yourself a nuisance to me I'll put those on your track who'll set you swinging. Stand fast by me and I'll treat

you fair and square, but get up to any hanky-panky and I'll put such a stopper on your mouth that you'll never be able to open it again."

Gibbs leaned against the door with a face like lead. It was evident that however much he hated Bartrand he feared him a good deal more. A prettier pair of rogues it would have been difficult to find in a long day's march.

"You needn't be afraid, Mr. Bartrand," he said at last, but this time in no certain voice. "I'll not split on you as long as you treat me fairly. You've been a good friend to me in the past, and I know you mean me well though you speak so plain."

"I know the sort of man with whom I have to deal, you see," returned Bartrand with another nasty sneer. "Now I must get my horse and be off. I've a lot to do if I want to get away to-night."

He went out into the verandah and unhitched his reins from the nails on which they were hanging.

"Let me have word directly that carrion in there comes to himself again," he said, as he got into the saddle. "And be sure you never breathe a word to him that I've been over. I'll let you know all that goes on as soon as we've got our claim fixed up. In the meantime, mum's the word. Good-bye."

Gibbs bade him good-bye, and when he had watched him canter off across the plain returned to the room where I lay. Evidently his conscience was reproving him, for he stood by my bed for some minutes looking down at me in silence. Then he heaved a little sigh and said under his breath, "You miserable beggar, how little you know what is happening, but I'm bothered if I don't think after all that you're a dashed sight happier than I am. I'm beginning to wish I'd not given you away to that devil. The remembrance of it will haunt me all my life long."

I woke up with his last speech ringing in my ears, and for a moment could scarcely believe my own eyes. I had imagined myself back in the bush, and to wake up in the smoking room of a London hotel was a surprise for which I was not prepared. The clock over the door was just striking eleven as I rose to my feet and went out into the hall. Taking my coat down from a peg I put it on, and then, donning my hat and turning up my collar, went out into the street. Snow was still falling, and the night was bitterly cold. As I walked I thought again of the dream from which I had just wakened. It seemed more like a vision intended for my guidance than the mere imagining of an over-excited brain. How much would I not have given to know if it was only imagination, or whether I had been permitted to see a representation of what had really happened? This question, however, I could not of course answer.

On reaching the Strand I hailed a hansom and bade the driver convey me with all speed to 23, Great Gunter Street, Soho.

"Twenty-three, Great Gunter Street?" repeated the man, staring at me in surprise. "You don't surely mean that, sir?"

"I do," I answered. "If you don't like the job I can easily find another man."

"Oh, I'll take you there, never fear, sir," replied the man; "but I didn't know perhaps whether you was aware what sort of a crib it is. It's not the shop gentlemen goes to as a general rule at night time, except maybe they're after a dog as has been stole, or the like."

"So it's that sort of place is it?" I answered. "Well, I don't know that it matters. I'm able to take care of myself."

As I said this I got into the vehicle, and in half a minute we were driving down the Strand in the direction of Soho. In something under a quarter of an hour we had left Leicester Square behind us, crossed Shaftesbury Avenue, and turned into Great Gunter Street. It proved to be exactly what the driver had insinuated, neither a respectable nor a savoury neighbourhood; and when I saw it and its inhabitants I ceased to wonder at his hesitation. When he had proceeded half-way down the street he pulled his horse up before the entrance to what looked like a dark alley leading into a court. Realising that this must be my destination I opened the apron and sprang out.

"Number 23 is somewhere hereabouts, sir," said the driver, who seemed to derive a certain amount of satisfaction from his ignorance of the locality. "I don't doubt but what one of these boys will be able to tell you exactly."

I paid him his fare and sixpence over for his civility, and then turned to question a filthy little gutter urchin, who, with bare feet and chattering teeth, was standing beside me.

"Where is 23, my lad?" I inquired. "Can you take me to it?"

"Twenty-three, sir?" said the boy. "That's where Crooked Billy lives, sir. You come along with me and I'll show you the way."

"Go ahead then," I answered, and the boy thereupon bolted into the darkness of the alley before which we had been

standing. I followed him as quickly as I could, but it was a matter of some difficulty, for the court was as black as the Pit of Tophet, and seemed to twist and turn in every conceivable direction. A more unprepossessing place it would have been difficult to find. Half-way down I heard the boy cry out 'Hold up, mother!' and before I could stop I found myself in collision with a woman who, besides being unsteady on her legs, reeked abominably of gin. Disengaging myself, to the accompaniment of her curses, I sped after my leader, and a moment later emerged into the open court itself. The snow had ceased, and the three-quarter moon, sailing along through swift flying clouds, showed me the surrounding houses. In one or two windows, lights were burning, revealing sights which almost made my flesh creep with loathing. In one I could see a woman sewing as if for her very life by the light of a solitary candle stuck in a bottle, while two little children lay asleep, half-clad, on a heap of straw and rags in the corner. On my right I had a glimpse of another room, where the dead body of a man was stretched upon a mattress on the floor, with two old hags seated at a table beside it, drinking gin from a black bottle, turn and turn about. The wind whistled mournfully among the roof tops; the snow had been trodden into a disgusting slush everywhere, save close against the walls, where it still showed white as silver; while the reflection of the moon gleamed in the icy puddles golden as a spade guinea.

"This is number 23," said my conductor, pointing to the door before which he stood.

I rewarded him, and then turned my attention to the door indicated.

Having rapped with my knuckles upon the panel, I waited for it to be opened to me. But those inside were in no hurry, and for this reason some minutes elapsed before I heard anyone moving about; then there came the sound of shuffling feet, and next moment the door was opened an inch or two, and a female voice inquired with an oath--which I will omit--what was wanted and who was wanting it.

To the first query I replied by asking if Levi Solomon lived there, and, if he did, whether I could see him. The second I shirked altogether. In answer I was informed that Levi Solomon did reside there, and that if I was the gentleman who had called to see him about a hansom cab I was to come in at once.

The door was opened to me, and I immediately stepped into the grimmest, most evil-smelling passage it has ever been my ill luck to set foot in. The walls were soiled and stained almost beyond recognition; the floor was littered with orange peel, paper, cabbage leaves, and garbage of all sorts and descriptions, while the stench that greeted me baffles description. I have never smelled anything like it before, and I hope I may never do so again.

The most I can say for the old lady who admitted me is that she matched her surroundings. She was short almost to dwarfishness, well-nigh bald, and had lost her left eye. Her dress consisted of a ragged skirt, and in place of a body--I believe that is the technical expression--she wore a man's coat, which gave a finishing touch of comicality to the peculiar outline of her figure. As soon as she saw that I had entered, she bade me shut the door behind me and follow her. This I did by means of a dilapidated staircase, in which almost every step was taken at the risk of one's life, to the second floor. Having arrived there, she knocked upon a door facing her; and I noticed that it was not until she had been ordered to enter that she ventured to turn the handle.

"The gentleman what has come about the 'ansom keb," she said, as she ushered me into the room.

The apartment was lit by two candles stuck in their own wax upon a little deal table, and by their rays I could distinguish the man I had come in search of standing by the fireplace awaiting me. He did not greet me until he had made certain, by listening at the keyhole, that the old woman had gone downstairs. He was a quaint little fellow, Jewish from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He had the nose of his race, little beady eyes as sharp as gimlets, and a long beard which a little washing might have made white. He was dressed in a black frock coat two sizes too large for him, black trousers that would have fitted a man three times his size, and boots that had been patched and otherwise repaired till their original maker would not have known them again.

"Mr. Pennethorne, I presume," he began, rubbing his hands together and speaking as if he had a bad cold in his head. "I am delighted to see you. I am sorry that I cannot ask you to sit down, but I have no chair to give you. For the same reason I cannot offer you refreshment. Have you had a good look at me?"

My surprise at this abrupt question prevented my replying for a moment; then I insinuated that I thought I should know him again, after which, with a muttered "That's all right," he blew out one of the candles, remarking that, as we now knew each other, we could conduct our business quite as well with half the light.

"I received word from our mutual acquaintance Dr. Nikola this morning," he began, when the illumination had been

thus curtailed, "that you would be coming to see me. Of course I did not ask the business, for Dr. Nikola is my friend, and I obey and trust him to the letter. By his instructions I am to fit you with a disguise, and then to take you to the place where you will discover a certain hansom cab awaiting you."

I nodded. At the very mention of the cab my old hatred of Bartrand sprang up again, and I began to question the Jew as to where we were to find it and what I was to do when I had got it. But this impetuosity did not meet with his approval.

"My young friend, you must not be in such a hurry," he said, wagging his head deprecatingly at me.

"We shall have to be sure we make no mistake, otherwise the doctor would not be pleased, and I should not like to risk that. Have you known Dr. Nikola very long?"

"I met him this morning for the first time in my life," I answered, realising on what intimate terms we now stood, considering the length of our acquaintance.

"If that is so you have much to learn regarding him," the Jew replied. "Let us be very careful that we do not risk his displeasure. Now we will get to work, for it is nearly time for us to be going."

As he spoke he crossed to a cupboard in the corner of the room, and took from it some garments which he placed upon the table in the centre.

"Here we have the very identical things," he said, "and when you've got them on, you'll be as smart a cabby as any that mounts his box in the streets of London. Try this and see how it suits you."

He handed me a bushy black beard, which worked on springs, and assisted me to fasten it to my face. When it was made secure he stepped back and examined it critically; then with a muttered "that will do," turned to the garments on the table, and selected from the heap a tarpaulin cape, such as cabmen wear in wet weather. This I fixed round my shoulders. A sou'wester was next placed upon my head, and when this was done, as far as I was concerned, we were ready to be off. My curious acquaintance was not long in making his toilet, and five minutes later found us passing out of the filthy alley into Great Gunter Street once more.

"I'll go first," said the Jew. "You follow two or three paces behind me. It's just as well we should not be seen together."

I accordingly took up my position a few steps in the rear, and in this fashion dodged along behind him, until we reached the corner of Wardour and Pultney Streets. Here my guide stopped and looked about him. Evidently what he wanted was not forthcoming, for he began to grow uneasy, and stamped up and down the pavement, looking eagerly in each direction. All the time I did not venture to approach him. I was considering what I was about to do. I thought of my father, and my brother and sisters, and wondered what they would have thought if they could have known to what a pass I had fallen. What would my poor mother have said if she had lived? But she, as far as I could learn from those who had known her, had been a gentle Christian woman, and if she had lived I should in all probability never have left England. In that case I should not have known Bartrand, and this revenge would then not have been necessary. By what small chances are our destinies shaped out for us!

At last the rattle of wheels sounded, and a moment later a smart hansom cab, which I recognised as that shown me by Nikola at his house that morning, drove down the street and pulled up at the corner where we stood. The lamps glowed brightly in the frosty air, and it was evident the horse was one of spirit, for he tossed his head and pawed the ground with impatience to be off again.

The driver descended from his perch, while the Jew went to the horse's head. The other was a tall fellow, and until he came into the light of the lamps I could not see his face. To my surprise, he did not speak, but stood fumbling in the pocket of his oilskin for something, which proved to be a letter. This he handed to me.

I opened it and scanned its contents. It was, of course, from Nikola.

"Dear--Everything is arranged, and I send you this, with the cab, by my servant, who, as you know, will not reveal anything. As soon as you receive it, mount and drive to Pall Mall. Be opposite the Monolith Club punctually at 11.30 and once there, keep your eyes open for the man we want. I will arrange that he shall leave exactly as the clock chimes, and will also see that he takes your cab. When you have dropped your fare in a quiet street, drive as fast as you can go to Hogarth Square, and wait at, or near, the second lamppost on the left-hand side. I will pick you up there, and will arrange the rest. The man in question has been entertaining a distinguished company, including two dukes and a Cabinet Minister, at dinner this evening, but I have arranged to meet and amuse him at twelve. May good luck attend you.

"Yours, N."

I stuffed the note into my pocket and then glanced at my watch. It was exactly a quarter-past eleven, so if I wanted to be at the rendezvous at the time stated it was necessary that I should start at once. Without more ado, I climbed on to the seat at the back, wound the rug *I* found there round my legs, put on the badge the Chinaman handed up to me, and, whipping up the horse, much to the Jew's consternation, drove off down the street at a rapid pace. As I turned into Great Windmill Street snow began to fall again, and I gave an evil chuckle as I reflected that even the forces of Nature were assisting me in my murderous intentions. In my heart I had no pity for the man whom I was about to kill. He had robbed me as cruelly as one man could rob another, and now I was going to repay him for his treachery.



CHAPTER 37. THE LUST OF HATE.

THE cab horse was a fine animal, and spun along to such good purpose that when I turned from Waterloo Place into Pall Mall I had, contrary to my expectations, still some few minutes to spare. Now that the actual moment for putting into effect the threats I had so often uttered against the man who had wronged me so cruelly, had arrived, strange to say I was seized with a sudden and inexplicable feeling of compassion for him. Badly as he had injured me, and desirous as I was of repaying him for his treachery, I discovered I could not bring myself to do what I had arranged without reluctance. If it had been a matter of fair fighting, with the certainty of no one interfering between us, it would have been a totally different matter, and I could have gone into it with a light heart; but now to decoy him to his death by the aid of Nikola's science was an act of cowardice at which my whole nature revolted.

Feeling half inclined to put off--if not for ever, at least for that evening the dastardly deed I had had arranged for me--I drove slowly down the street, quite unable to resist the temptation of seeing the man whom, if I wished to do so, I could kill so easily. In the event of his hailing me as had been arranged, I would reply that I was engaged, and leave him to find another vehicle, unconscious of the narrowness of his escape. At any cost *I* would not let him set foot in my conveyance. While *I* was thus arguing with myself *I* was drawing closer and closer to the Monolith Club. Already *I* could discern the stalwart form of the commissioner standing upon the steps under the great lamp. At the moment that I approached, two men left the building arm in arm, but neither of them was the man I wanted. Little by little their steps died away in the distance, and so nicely had I timed my arrival that the clock at the Palace ahead chimed the half-hour exactly as I came opposite the steps. At the same instant the doors of the Club opened, and Bartrand and another man, whom I recognised instantly as Nikola, came out. The mere sight of the man I hated shattered all my plans in an instant. In the presence of the extraordinary individual accompanying him I had not sufficient pluck to cry "engaged"; so, when the commissioner hailed me, there was nothing for it but to drive across the road and pull up alongside the pavement, as we had previously arranged.

"You're in luck's way, Bartrand," cried Nikola, glancing at my horse, which was tossing his head and pawing the ground as if eager to be off again; "that's a rare good nag of yours, cabby. He's worth an extra fare."

I grunted something in reply, I cannot remember what. The mere sight of Bartrand standing there on the pavement scanning the horse, had roused all my old antipathy; and, as I have said, my good resolves were cast to the winds like so much chaff.

"Well, for the present, *au revoir*, my dear fellow," said Nikola, shaking hands with his victim. "I will meet you at the house in half-an-hour, and if you care about it you can have your revenge then; now you had better be going. Twenty-eight, Saxeburgh Street, cabby, and don't be long about it."

I touched my hat and opened the apron for Bartrand to step inside. When he had done so he ordered me to lower the glass, and not be long in getting him to his destination or I'd hear of it at the other end. He little thought how literally I might interpret the command.

Leaving Nikola standing on the pavement looking after us, I shook up my horse and drove rapidly down the street. My whole body was tingling with exultation; but that it would have attracted attention and spoiled my revenge, I felt I could have shouted my joy aloud. Here I was with my enemy in my power; by lifting the shutter in the roof of the cab I could see him lolling inside--thinking, doubtless, of his wealth, and little dreaming how close he was to the poor fellow he had wronged so cruelly. The knowledge that by simply pressing the spring under my hand I could destroy him in five seconds, and then choosing a quiet street could tip him out and be done with him for ever, intoxicated me like the finest wine. No one would suspect, and Nikola, for his own sake, would never betray me. While I was thinking in this fashion, and gloating over what I was about to do, I allowed my horse to dawdle a little. Instantly an umbrella was thrust up through the shutter and I was ordered, in the devil's name, to drive faster.

"Ah! my fine fellow," I said to myself, "you little know how near you are to the master by whom you swear. Wait a few moments until I've had a little more pleasure out of your company, and then we'll see what I can do for you."

On reaching Piccadilly I turned west, and for some distance followed the proper route for Saxeburgh Street. All the time I was thinking, thinking, and thinking of what I was about to do. He was at my mercy; any instant I could make him a

dead man, and the cream of the jest was that he did not know it. My fingers played with the fatal knob, and once I almost pressed it. The touch of the cold steel sent a thrill through me, and at the same instant one of the most extraordinary events of my life occurred. I am almost chary of relating it, lest my readers may feel inclined to believe that I am endeavouring to gull them with the impossible. But, even at the risk of that happening, I must tell my story as it occurred to me. As I put my hand for the last time upon the knob there rose before my eyes, out of the half dark, a woman's face, and looked at me. At first I could scarcely believe my own eyes. I rubbed them and looked again. It was still there, apparently hanging in mid-air above the horse I was driving. It was not, if one may judge by the photographs of famous beauties, a perfect face, but there was that in it that made it to me the most captivating I had ever seen in my life--I refer to the expression of gentleness and womanly goodness that animated it. The contour of the face was oval, the mouth small and well-shaped, and the eyes large, true, and unflinching. Though it only appeared before me for a few seconds, I had time to take thorough stock of it, and to remember every feature. It seemed to be looking straight at me, and the mouth to be saying as plainly as any words could speak--"Think of what you are doing, Gilbert Pennethorne; remember the shame of it, and be true to yourself." Then she faded away; and, as she went, a veil that had been covering my eyes for months seemed now to drop from them, and I saw myself for what I really was--a coward and a would-be murderer.

We were then passing down a side street, in which--fortunately for what I was about to do--there was not a single person of any sort to be seen. Happen what might, I would now stop the cab and tell the man inside who I was and with what purpose I had picked him up. Then he should go free, and in letting him understand that I had spared his life I would have my revenge. With this intention I pulled my horse up, and, unwrapping my rug from my knees, descended from my perch. I had drawn up the glass before dismounting, the better to be able to talk to him.

"Mr. Bartrand," I said, when I had reached the pavement, at the same time pulling off my false beard and my sou'wester, "this business has gone far enough, and I am now going to tell you who I am and what I wanted with you. Do you know me?"

Either he was asleep or he was too surprised at seeing me before him to speak, at any rate he offered no reply to my question.

"Mr. Bartrand," I began again, "I ask you if you are aware who I am?"

Still no answer was vouchsafed to me, and immediately an overwhelming fear took possession of me. I sprang upon the step and tore open the apron. What I saw inside made me recoil with terror. In the corner, his head thrown back and his whole body rigid, lay the unfortunate man I had first determined to kill, but had since decided to spare. *I ran my hands, all trembling with terror, over his body. The man was dead--and I had killed him.* By some mischance I must have pressed the spring which opened the valve, and thus the awful result had been achieved. Though years have elapsed since it happened, I can feel the agony of that moment as plainly now as if it was but yesterday.

When I understood that the man was really dead, and that I was his murderer--branded henceforth with the mark of Cain--I sat down on the pavement in a cold sweat of terror, trembling in every limb. The face of the whole world had changed within the past few minutes--now I knew I could never be like other men again. Already the fatal noose was tightening round my neck.

While these thoughts were racing through my brain, my ears, now preternaturally sharp, had detected the ring of a footstep on the pavement a hundred yards or so away. Instantly I sprang to my feet, my mind alert and nimble, my whole body instinct with the thought of self-preservation. Whatever happened I must not be caught, red-handed, with the body of the murdered man in my possession. At any risk I must rid myself of that, and speedily, too.

Climbing to my perch again I started my horse off at a rapid pace in the same direction in which I had been proceeding when I had made my awful discovery. On reaching the first cross-roads I branched off to the right, and, discovering that to be a busy thoroughfare, turned to the left again. Never before had my fellow-man inspired me with such terror. At last I found a deserted street, and was in the act of pressing the lever with my foot when a door in a house just ahead of me opened, and a party of ladies and gentlemen issued from it. Some went in one direction, others in a contrary, and I was between both. To drop the body where they could see it would be worse than madness, so, almost cursing them for interrupting me, I lashed my horse and darted round the first available corner. Once more I found a quiet place, but this time I was interrupted by a cab turning into the street and coming along behind me. The third time, however, was more successful. I looked carefully about me. The street was empty in front and behind. On either side were rows of respectable

middle-class houses, with never a light in a window or a policeman to be seen.

Trembling like a leaf, I stopped the cab, and when I had made sure that there was no one looking, placed my foot upon the lever. So perfect was the mechanism that it acted instantly, and, what was better still, without noise. Next moment Bartrand was lying upon his back in the centre of the road. As soon as his weight released it the bottom of the vehicle rose, and I heard the spring click as it took its place again. Before I drove on I turned and looked at him where he lay so still and cold on the pure white snow, and thought of the day at Markapurlie, when he had turned me off the station for wanting to doctor poor Ben Garman, and also of the morning when I had denounced him to the miners on the Boolga Bange, after I had discovered that he had stolen my secret and appropriated my wealth. How little either of us thought then what the end of our hatred was to be! If I had been told on the first day we had met that I should murder him, and that he would ultimately be found lying dead in the centre of a London street, I very much doubt if either of us would have believed it possible. But how horribly true it was!

As to what I was now, there could be no question. The ghastly verdict was self-evident, and the word rang in my brain with a significance I had never imagined it to possess before. It seemed to be written upon the houses, to be printed upon the snow-curdled sky. Even the roll of the wheels beneath me proclaimed me a murderer. Until that time I had had no real conception of what that grisly word meant. Now I knew it for the most awful in the whole range of our English language.

All this time I had been driving aimlessly on and on, having no care where I went, conscious only that I must put as great a distance as possible between myself and the damning evidence of my crime. Then a reaction set in, and I became aware that to continue driving in this half-coherent fashion was neither politic nor sensible, so I pulled myself together and tried to think what I had better do. The question for my consideration was whether I should hasten to Hogarth Square as arranged and hand the cab over to Nikola, or whether I should endeavour to dispose of it in some other way, and not go near that dreadful man again. One thing was indisputable: whatever I did, I must do quickly. It was nearly one o'clock by this time, and if I wanted to see him at the rendezvous I must hurry, or he would have gone before I reached it. In that case, what should I do with the cab?

After anxious thought I came to the conclusion that I had better find him and hand him his terrible property. Then, if I wished to give him the slip, I could lead him to suppose I intended returning to my hotel, and afterwards act as I might deem best for my own safety. This once decided, I turned the vehicle round, whipped up the horse, and set off for Hogarth Square as fast as I could go. It was a long journey, for several times I missed my way and had to retrace my steps; but at last I accomplished it and drove into the Square. Sure enough at the second lamp-post on the left hand side, where he had appointed to meet me, three men were standing beside a hansom cab, and from the way they peered about, it was evident they were anxiously awaiting the arrival of someone. One I could see at first glance was Nikola, the other was probably his Chinese servant, the man who had brought me the cab earlier in the evening, but the third's identity I could not guess. Nor did I waste time trying.

As I approached them Nikola held up his hand as a signal to me to stop, and I immediately pulled up and got down. Not a question did he ask about my success or otherwise, but took from the second cab a bowler hat and a top coat, which I recognised as the garments I had left at Levi Solomon's that evening.

"Put these on," he said, "and then come with me as quickly as you can. I have a lot to say to you."

I did as he ordered me, and when my sou'wester and cape had been tossed into the empty cab, he beckoned me to follow him down the square. His servant had meanwhile driven that awful cab away.

"Now, what have you to tell me?" he asked, when we had walked a little distance along the pavement.

I stopped and faced him with a face, I'll be bound, as ashen as that of a corpse.

"I have done your fiendish bidding," I hissed. "I am--God help me--unintentionally what you have made me--a murderer."

"Then the man is dead, is he?" replied Nikola, with icy calmness. "That is satisfactory. Now we have to divert suspicion from yourself. All things considered, I think you had better go straight back to your hotel, and keep quiet there until I communicate with you. You need have no fear as to your safety. No one will suspect you. Hitherto we have been most successful in eluding detection."

As he spoke, the memory of the other murders which had shocked all London flashed through my brain, and instantly I realised everything. The victims, so the medical men stated, had in each case been killed by some anesthetic: they had

been found in the centre of the road, as if dropped from a vehicle, while their faces had all been mutilated in the same uncanny fashion. I turned and looked at the man by my side, and then, in an unaccountable fit of rage, threw myself upon him. The men who actually did the deeds were innocent--here was the real murderer--the man who had instigated and egged them on to crime. He had led my soul into hell, but he should not escape scot free.

The suddenness of my passion took him completely by surprise, but only for an instant. Then, with a quick movement of his hands, he caught my wrists, and held me in a grip of iron. I was disarmed and powerless, and he knew it, and laughed mockingly.

"So you would try and add me to your list, would you, Mr. Gilbert Pennethorne? Be thankful that I am mercifully inclined, and do not punish you as you deserve."

Without another word he threw me from him, with the ease of a practised wrestler, and I fell upon the pavement as if I had been shot. The shock brought me to my senses, and I rose an altogether different man, though still hating him with a tenfold loathing as the cause of all my misery. Having once rid himself of me however, he seemed to think no more of the matter.

"Now be off to your hotel," he said sharply, "and don't stir from it until I communicate with you. By making this fuss you might have hung yourself, to say nothing of implicating me. To-morrow morning I will let you know what is best to be done. In the meantime, remain indoors, feign ill health, and don't see any strangers on any pretext whatever."

He stood at the corner of the Square, and watched me till I had turned the corner, as cool and diabolical a figure as the Author of all Evil himself. I only looked back once, and then walked briskly on until I reached Piccadilly Circus, where I halted and gazed about me in a sort of dim confused wonderment at my position. What a variety of events had occurred since the previous night, when I had stood in the same place, and had heard the policeman's whistle sound from Jermyn Street, in proclamation of the second mysterious murder! How little I had then thought that within twenty-four hours I should be in the same peril as the murderer of the man I had seen lying under the light of the policeman's lantern! Perhaps even at this moment Bartrand's body had been discovered, and a hue and cry was on foot for the man who had done the deed. With this thought in my mind, a greater terror than I had yet felt came over me, and I set off as hard as I could go down a bye-street into Trafalgar Square, thence by way of Northumberland Avenue on to the Embankment. Once there I leant upon the coping and looked down at the dark water slipping along so silently on its way to the sea. Here was my chance if only I had the pluck to avail myself of it. Life had now no hope left for me. Why should I not throw myself over, and so escape the fate that must inevitably await me if I lived? One moment's courage, a little struggling in the icy water, a last choking cry, and then it would all be over and done with, and those who had the misfortune to call themselves my kinsmen would be spared the mortification of seeing me standing in a felon's dock. I craned my neck still further over the side, and looked at the blocks of ice as they went by, knocking against each other with a faint musical sound that sounded like the tinkling of tiny bells. I remembered the depth of the river, and pictured my sodden body stranded on to the mud by the ebbing tide somewhere near the sea. I could fancy the conjectures that would be made concerning it. Would anyone connect me with--but there, I could not go on. Nor could I do what I had proposed. Desperate as was my case, I found I still clung to life with a tenacity that even crime itself could not lessen. No; by hook or crook I must get out of England to some place where nobody would know me, and where I could begin a new life. By cunning it could surely be managed. But in that case I knew I must not go back to my hotel, and run the risk of seeing Nikola again. I distrusted his powers of saving me; and, if I fell once more under his influence, goodness alone knew what I might not be made to do. No; I would make some excuse to the landlord to account for my absence, and then creep quietly out of England in such a way that no one would suspect me. But how was it to be managed? To remain in London would be to run endless risks. Anyone might recognise me, and then capture would be inevitable. I turned out my pockets and counted my money. Fortunately, I had cashed a cheque only the day before, and now had nearly forty pounds in notes and gold in my purse; not very much, it is true, but amply sufficient for my present needs. The question was: Where should I go? Australia, the United States, South America, South Africa? Which of these places would be safest? The first and second I rejected without consideration. The first I had tried, the second I had no desire to visit. Chili, the Argentine, or Bechuanaland? It all depended on the boats. To whichever place a vessel sailed first, to that place I would go.

Casting one last glance at the ice-bound water below me, and with a shudder at the thought of what I had contemplated doing when I first arrived upon the Embankment, I made my way back into the Strand. It was now close upon three o'clock, and already a few people were abroad. If I were not out of London within a few hours, I might be

caught. I would go directly I had decided what it was imperative I should know. Up one street and down another I toiled until at last I came upon what I wanted, a small restaurant in a back street, devoted to the interests of the early arrivals at Covent Garden Market. It was only a tiny place, shabby in the extreme, but as it just suited my purpose, I walked boldly in, and ordered a cup of cocoa and a plate of sausages. While they were being prepared I seated myself in one of the small compartments along the opposite wall, and with my head upon my hands tried to think coherently. When the proprietor brought me the food, I asked him if he could oblige me with the loan of writing materials. He glanced at me rather queerly, I thought, but did not hesitate to do what I asked. When he had gone again I dipped the pen into the ink and wrote a note to the proprietor of my hotel, telling him that I had been suddenly taken out of town by important business, and asking him to forward my boxes, within a week, to the cloak room, Aberdeen railway station, labelled "*to be called for.*" I chose Aberdeen for the reason that it was a long distance from London, and also because it struck me that if enquiries were made by the police it would draw attention off my real route, which would certainly not be in that direction. I then wrote a cheque for the amount of my account, enclosed it, and having done so sealed up the letter and put it in my pocket. On an adjoining table I espied a newspaper, which I made haste to secure. Turning to the column where the shipping advertisements were displayed, I searched the list for a vessel outward bound to one of the ports I had chosen. I discovered that to Chili or any of the South American Republics there would not be a boat sailing for at least a week to come. When I turned to South Africa I was more fortunate; a craft named the *Fiji Princess* was advertised to sail from Southampton for Cape Town at 11 a.m. on this self-same day. She was of 4,000 tons burden, but had only accommodation for ten first-class passengers and fifty in the steerage. What pleased me better still, she would only call at Tenerife on the way. The steerage fare was fifteen pounds, and it was by this class I determined to travel. My mind once made up, the next thing to decide was how to reach Southampton without incurring suspicion. To catch the boat this could only be done by rail, and to further increase my store of knowledge I had again to borrow from the proprietor of the restaurant. From the time table he lent me I found that a train left Waterloo every morning at six o'clock, which would get me to the docks before nine o'clock, thus allowing me two full hours in which to make my preparations and to get on board in comfortable time; that is, supposing she sailed at the hour stated. But I had still three hours to put in in London before the train would start, and how to occupy them without running any risk I could not tell. It was quite impossible for me to remain where I was, and yet to go out and walk about the streets would be dangerous in the extreme. In that time Nikola might get hold of me again, and I believe I dreaded that more than even falling into the clutches of the law. Suddenly I was struck by what seemed a splendid idea. What if I walked out of London to some station along the line where the train would pick me up? In that case no one would be able to remember seeing me start from Waterloo, and I should be believed to be still in London. The thought was no sooner born in my brain than I picked up my hat and prepared to be off.

When I paid at the counter for my meal, and also for the note paper with which the proprietor had obliged me, I strode out of the restaurant and down the street into the Strand again. Surbiton, I reflected, was twelve miles from Waterloo, and, besides being quiet, it was also one of the places at which I had noticed that the train was advertised to call. I had almost three hours before me in which to do the distance, and if I walked at the rate of five miles an hour it was evident I should accomplish it with ease. To Surbiton, therefore, I would go.

Having made my way back to Charing Cross, I passed down Whitehall and over Westminster Bridge to the Lambeth Palace Road. Under the influence of my new excitement I felt easier in my mind than I had been since I made my awful discovery three hours before, but still not easy enough to be able to pass a policeman without a shudder. Strangely enough, considering that I had had no sleep at all, and had been moving about all night, I was not conscious of the least fatigue, but strode along the pavement at a swinging pace, probably doing more than I had intended when I had first set out. The snow had ceased, but a nasty fog was rising from the river to take its place. I pictured the state of London when day should break, and devoutly thanked Heaven that I should be well out of it by that time. I could imagine the newsboys running about the streets with cries of "Another 'orrible murder! A millionaire the victim." I seemed to see the boards stuck before shop doors with the same ghastly headline, and I could realise the consternation of the town, when it awoke to find the mysterious assassin still at work in its midst. Then would follow the inquest. The porter at the Monolith Club would be called upon to give evidence, and would affirm that he had seen the deceased gentleman step into a smart hansom, driven by a cabman dressed in an oilskin cape and a sou'wester, and would probably remember having noticed that the cabby was a gruff fellow with a bushy, black beard. The next witnesses would be the finders of the body, and after that the same verdict would be returned--"Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown"--as had been given in the previous

cases.

If only Nikola remained faithful to me I should probably have time to get out of England before the police could stop me, and, once among the miners of the Rand, I should be able to arrange matters in such a way that recognition would be almost an impossibility. With a sigh of relief at this comfortable thought, I pushed on a little faster along the Wandsworth Road until I reached Clapham Junction Station. As I did so I looked at my watch. It was just a quarter to four, and already the footpaths were becoming dotted with pedestrians.

Leaving Clapham Junction behind me, I passed along the Lavender Hill Road, through Wandsworth, and struck out along the road to West Hill, then across Putney Heath, through Kingston Vale, and so into Kingston. From that quaint old riverside town to Surbiton is but a step, and exactly as the church clocks in the latter place were chiming a quarter to six, I stood on the platform of the railway station prepared to board my train when it should come in sight. The last four miles had been done at a fast pace, and by the time I had taken my ticket I was completely worn out. My anxiety was so keen that I could not sit down, but waited until I should be safely on board the train. The cries of the newsboys seemed still to be ringing in my ears--“Another ‘orrible murder! Discovery of the body of a famous millionaire!”

To while away the time I went out of the station again and explored the deserted streets, passing houses in which the owners still lay fast asleep, little dreaming of the miserable man who was tramping along in the cold outside. A biting north wind blew over the snow, and chilled me to the marrow. The leaden hand of despair was pressing hard upon my heart, and when I looked at the rows of trim, matter-of-fact residences *on* either side of me, and thought of the gulf that separated their inmates from myself, I groaned aloud in abject misery.

At five minutes to the hour I returned to the station, and, just as I reached it, punctual almost to the tick of the clock, the train made its appearance round the bend of the line. With the solitary exception of an old man I was the only passenger from this station; and, as soon as I had discovered an empty third-class compartment, I got in and stowed myself away in a corner. Almost before the train was out of the station I was fast asleep, dreaming of Nikola and of the horrible events of the night just past. Once more I drove the cab along the snow-covered streets; once more that strange woman's face rose before me in warning; and once more I descended from my seat to make the horrible discovery that my enemy was dead. In my agony I must have shrieked aloud, for the noise I made woke me up. An elderly man, possibly a successful country butcher from his appearance, who must have got in at some station we had stopped at while I slept, was sitting in the corner opposite, watching me.

“You have been having a pretty bad nightmare these last few minutes, I should say, mister,” he observed, with a smile. “I was just going to give you a shake up when you woke yourself by screaming out like that.”

An awful fear came over me. Was it possible that in my sleep I had revealed my secret?

“I am sorry I disturbed you,” I said, faintly, “but I am subject to bad dreams. Have I been talking very much?”

“Not so far as I've heard,” he answered; “but you've been moaning and groaning as if you'd got something on your mind that you wanted to tell pretty bad.”

“I've just got over a severe illness,” I replied, relieved beyond measure to hear that I had kept my dreadful secret to myself, “and I suppose that accounts for the uneasy way in which I sleep.”

My companion looked at me rather searchingly for a few seconds, and then began to fumble in his greatcoat pocket for something. Presently he produced a large spirit flask.

“Let me give you a drop of whiskey,” he said, kindly. “It will cheer you up, and you look as if you want it right down bad.”

He poured about half a wineglassful into the little nickel-plated cup that fitted the bottom of the flask, and handed it to me. I thanked him sincerely, and tossed it off at one gulp. It was neat spirit, and ran through my veins like so much fire. Though it burnt my throat pretty severely, it did me a world of good, and in a few moments I was sufficiently recovered to talk reasonably enough.

At nine o'clock almost to the minute we drew up at Southampton Docks, and then, bidding my fellow passenger good morning, I quickly quitted the station. Before I left London I had carefully noted the address of the steamship company's agents, and, having ascertained the direction of their office, I made my way towards it. Early as was the hour I found it open, and upon being interrogated by the clerk behind the counter, stated my desire to book as steerage passenger for Cape Town by the steamer *Fiji Princess*, which they advertised as leaving the docks that day. The clerk looked at me with some

surprise when I said “steerage,” but, whatever he may have thought, he offered no comment upon it.

“What is your name?” he inquired, dipping his pen in the ink.

I had anticipated this question, and replied “George Wrexford” as promptly as if it had really been my patronymic.

Having paid the amount demanded, and received my ticket in exchange, I asked what time it would be necessary for me to be on board.

“Half-past ten without fail,” he answered. “She will cast off punctually at eleven; and I give you fair warning Captain Hawkins does not wait for anything or anybody.”

I thanked him for his courtesy and left the office, buttoning up my ticket in my pocket as I went down the steps. In four hours at most, all being well, I should be safely out of England; and, for a little while, a free man. By half-past nine I had purchased a small outfit, and also the few odds and ends--such as bedding and mess utensils--that I should require on the voyage. This done I hunted about till I found a small restaurant, again in a back street, which I entered and ordered breakfast. As soon as I smelt the cooking I found that I was ravenous, and twice I had to call for more before my hunger was satisfied.”

Towards the end of my meal a paper boy put in an appearance, and my heart well-nigh stopped when I heard the girl beyond the counter enquire if there was “any startling news this morning.”

“Nother terrible murder in London,” answered the lad with fiendish glibness; and as he spoke my over-taxed strength gave way, and I fell back in my chair in a dead faint.

I suppose for a few moments I must have quite lost consciousness, for I can recollect nothing until I opened my eyes and found a small crowd collected round me, somebody sponging my forehead, and two people chafing my hands.

“How do you feel now?” enquired the nervous little man who had first come to my assistance.

“Better, thank you,” I replied, at the same time endeavouring to sit up. “Very much better. What has been the matter with me?”

“A bit of a faint, that’s all,” another answered. “Are you subject to them?”

“I’ve been very ill lately,” I said, giving them the same reply as I had done to the man in the train, “and I suppose I overtaxed my strength a little this morning. But, thanks to your kindness, I feel ever so much better now.”

As soon as I had recovered sufficiently, I paid my bill, and, having again sincerely thanked those who had assisted me, left the shop and hurried off to the docks as fast as I could go. It was now some few minutes after ten o’clock.

The *Fiji Princess* was a fair-sized vessel of an old-fashioned type, and very heavily laden; indeed, so heavy was she that she looked almost unsafe beside the great American liner near which she was berthed.

Having clambered on board I enquired my way to the steerage quarters, which were forward, then stowed away my things and endeavoured to make myself as comfortable as circumstances would permit in the place which was to be my home for the next five weeks or so. For prudence sake I remained below until I heard the whistle sound and could tell by the shaking that the steamship was moving. Then, when I had satisfied myself that we were really under way, I climbed the gangway that led to the deck and looked about me. Slowly as we were moving, we were already a hundred yards from the wharf side, and in a few minutes would be well out in Southampton Water. Eight aft a small crowd of passengers were grouped at the stern railings, waving their handkerchiefs and hats to a similar group ashore. Forward we were less demonstrative, for, as I soon discovered, the steerage passengers consisted only of myself, a circumstance which you may be very sure I did not by any means regret.

By mid-day we were in the Solent, and by lunch time the Isle of Wight lay over our taffrail. Now, unless I was stopped at Tenerife, I was certain of a month’s respite from the law. And when I realised this I went to my berth and, sinner as I was, knelt down and offered up the heartiest prayer of gratitude I have ever in my life given utterance to.



CHAPTER 38. A STRANGE COINCIDENCE.

If any man is desirous of properly understanding the feelings of gratitude and relief which filled my breast as the *Fiji Princess* steamed down channel that first afternoon out from Southampton, he must begin by endeavouring to imagine himself placed in the same unenviable position. For all I knew to the contrary, even while I stood leaning on the bulwarks watching the coast line away to starboard, some unlucky chance might be giving the police a clue to my identity, and the hue-and-cry already have begun. When I came to consider my actions during the past twenty-four hours, I seemed to be giving my enemies innumerable opportunities of discovering my whereabouts. My letter to the manager of the hotel, which I had posted in the Strand after leaving the Covent Garden restaurant, would furnish proof that I was in town before five o'clock--the time at which the box was cleared on the morning of the murder. Then, having ascertained that much, they would in all probability call at the hotel, and in instituting enquiries there, be permitted a perusal of the letter I had written to the manager that morning. Whether they would believe that I had gone north, as I desired they should suppose, was difficult to say; but in either case they would be almost certain to have all the southern seaports watched. I fancied, however, that my quickness in getting out of England would puzzle them a little, even if it did not baffle them altogether.

Unfortunately, the *Fiji Princess* had been the only vessel of importance sailing from Southampton on that particular day, and owing to the paucity of steerage passengers, I felt sure the clerk who gave me my ticket would remember me sufficiently well to be able to assist in the work of identification. Other witnesses against me would be the porters at Surbiton railway station, who had seen me arrive, tired and dispirited, after my long walk; the old man who had given me whiskey on the journey down; and the people in the restaurant where I had been taken ill would probably recognise me from the description. However, it was in my favour that I was here on the deck of the steamer, if not devoid of anxiety, at least free from the clutches of the law for the present.

The afternoon was perfectly fine, though bitterly cold; overhead stretched a blue sky, with scarcely a cloud from horizon to horizon; the sea was green as grass, and almost as smooth as a millpond. Since luncheon I had seen nothing of the passengers, nor had I troubled to inquire if the vessel carried her full complement. The saloon was situated right aft in the poop, the skipper had his cabin next to the chart room on the hurricane deck, and the officers theirs on either side of the engine-room, in the alley ways below. My quarters--I had them all to myself, as I said in the last chapter--were as roomy and comfortable as a man could expect for the passage-money I paid, and when I had made friends with the cook and his mate, I knew I should get through the voyage in comparative comfort.

At this point I am brought to the narration of the most uncanny portion of my story: a coincidence so strange that it seems almost impossible it can be true, and one for which I have never been able, in any way, to account. Yet, strange as it may appear, it must be told; and that it is true, have I not the best and sweetest evidence any man could desire in the world? It came about in this way. In the middle of the first afternoon, as already described, I was sitting smoking on the fore hatch, and at the same time talking to the chief steward. He had been to sea, so he told me, since he was quite a lad; and, as I soon discovered, had seen some strange adventures in almost every part of the globe. It soon turned out, as is generally the way, that I knew several men with whom he was acquainted, and in a few minutes we were upon the most friendly terms. From the sea our conversation changed to China, and in illustration of the character of the waterside people of that peculiar country, my companion narrated a story about a shipmate who had put off in a sampan to board his boat lying in Hong Kong harbour, and had never been seen or heard of again.

"It was a queer thing," he said impressively, as he shook the ashes out of his pipe and re-charged it, "as queer a thing as ever a man heard of. I spent the evening with the chap myself, and before we said 'good-bye' we arranged to go up to Happy Valley the Sunday morning following. But he never turned up, nor have I ever set eyes on him from that time to this. Whether he was murdered by the sampan's crew or whether he fell overboard and was drowned in the harbour, I don't suppose will ever be known."

"A very strange thing," I said, as bravely as I could, and instantly thought of the bond I had in common with that sampan's crew.

"Aye, strange; very strange," replied the steward, shaking his head solemnly; "but there's many strange things done

now-a-days. Look at these here murders that have been going on in London lately. I reckon it would be a wise man as could put an explanation on them.”

All my blood seemed to rush to my head, and my heart for a second stood still. I suffered agonies of apprehension lest he should notice my state and have his suspicions aroused, but he was evidently too much engrossed with his subject to pay any attention to my appearance. I knew I must say something, but my tongue was cleaving to the roof of my mouth. It was some moments before I found my voice, and then I said as innocently as possible--

“They are certainly peculiar, are they not? Have you any theory to account for them?”

This was plainly a question to his taste, and it soon became evident that he had discussed the subject in all its bearings on several occasions before.

“Do you want to know what I think?” he began slowly, fixing me with an eye that he seemed to imagine bored through me like an augur. “Well, what I think is that the Anarchists are at the bottom of it all, and I’ll tell you for why. Look at the class of men who were killed. Who was the first? A Major-General in the army, wasn’t he? Who was the second? A member of the House of Lords. Who was the third?”

He looked so searchingly at me that I felt myself quailing before his glance as if he had detected me in my guilt. Who could tell him better than I who the last victim was?

“And the third--well, he was one of these rich men as fattens on Society and the workin’ man, was he not?”

He pounded his open hand with his fist in the true fashion, and his eyes constantly challenged me to refute his statements if I were in a position to do so. But--heaven help me!--thankful as I would have been to do it, I was not able to gainsay him. Instead, I sat before him like a criminal in the dock, conscious of the danger I was running, yet unable for the life of me to avert it. Still, however, my tormentor did not notice my condition, but returned to the charge with renewed vigour. What he lacked in argument he made up in vehemence. And for nearly an hour I had to sit and bear the brunt of both.

“Now, I’ll ask you a question,” he said for the twentieth time, after he had paused to watch the effect of his last point. “Who do the Anarchists mostly go for? Why for what we may call, for the sake of argument, the leaders of Society--generals, peers, and millionaires. Those are the people, therefore, that they want to be **rid of**.”

“You think then,” I said, “that these--these crimes were the work of a party instead of an individual?”

He half closed his eyes and looked at me with an expression upon his face that seemed to implore me to contradict him.

“You know what I think,” he said; then with fine conceit, “If only other folk had as much *savee* as we have, the fellows who did the work would have been laid by the heels by this time. As it is they’ll never catch them--no, not till the moon’s made of cream cheese.”

With this avowal of his settled opinion he took himself off, and left me sitting on the hatch, hoping with all my heart and soul that, if in this lay my chance of safety, the world might long retain its present opinion. While I was ruminating on what he had said, and feeling that I would give five years of my life to know exactly how matters stood ashore, I chanced to look up at the little covered way on the hurricane deck below the bridge. My heart seemed to stand still. For the moment I thought I must be asleep and dreaming, for there, gazing across the sea, was the same woman’s face I had seen suspended in mid-air above my cab on the previous night. Astonishing as it may seem, there could be no possible doubt about it--I recognised the expressive eyes, the sweet mouth, and the soft, wavy hair as plainly as if I had known her all my life long.

Thinking it was still only a creation of my own fancy, and that in a moment it would fade away as before, I stared hard at it, resolved, while I had the chance, to still further impress every feature upon my memory. But it did not vanish as I expected. I rubbed my eyes in an endeavour to find out if I were awake or asleep, but that made no difference. She still remained. I was quite convinced by this time, however, that she was flesh and blood. But who could she be, and where had I really seen her face before? For something like five minutes I watched her, and then for the first time she looked down at the deck where I sat. Suddenly she caught sight of me, and almost at the same instant I saw her give a little start of astonishment. Evidently she had also seen me in some other place, but could no more recall it than myself.

As soon as she had recovered from her astonishment she glanced round the waste of water again and then moved away. But even when she had left me I could not for the life of me rid myself of my feeling of astonishment. I reviewed my past life in an attempt to remember where I had met her, but still without success. While I was wondering, my friend the

chief steward came along the deck again. I accosted him, and asked if he could tell me the name of the lady with the wavy brown hair whom I could see talking to the captain at the door of the chart house. He looked in the direction indicated, and then said:

"Her name is Maybourne--Miss Agnes Maybourne. Her father is a big mine owner at the Cape, so I'm told. Her mother died about a year ago, I heard the skipper telling a lady aft this morning, and it seems the poor young thing felt the loss terribly. She's been home for a trip with an old uncle to try and cheer her up a bit, and now they are on their way back home again."

"Thank you very much," I said. "I have been puzzling over her face for some time. She's exactly like someone I've met some time or other, but where, I can't remember."

On this introduction the steward favoured me with a long account of a cousin of his--a steward on board an Atlantic liner--who, it would appear, was always being mistaken for other people; to such a length did this misfortune carry him that he was once arrested in Liverpool on suspicion of being a famous forger who was then at large. Whether he was sentenced and served a term of penal servitude, or whether the mistake was discovered and he was acquitted, I cannot now remember; but I have a faint recollection that my friend described it as a case that baffled the ingenuity of Scotland Yard, and raised more than one new point of law, which he, of course, was alone able to set right in a satisfactory manner.

Needless to say, Miss Maybourne's face continued to excite my wonder and curiosity for the remainder of the afternoon; and when I saw her the following morning promenading the hurricane deck in the company of a dignified grey-haired gentleman, with a clean-shaven, shrewd face, who I set down to be her uncle, I discovered that my interest had in no way abated. This wonderment and mystification kept me company for longer than I liked, and it was not until we were bidding "good-bye" to the Channel that I determined to give up brooding over it and think about something else.

Once Old England was properly behind us, and we were out on the open ocean, experiencing the beauties of a true Atlantic swell, and wondering what our portion was to be in the Bay of Biscay, my old nervousness returned upon me. This will be scarcely a matter for wonder when you reflect that every day we were drawing nearer our first port of call, and at Tenerife I should know whether or not the police had discovered the route I had taken. If they had, I should certainly be arrested as soon as the vessel came to anchor, and be detained in the Portuguese prison until an officer should arrive from England to take charge of me and conduct me home for trial. Again and again I pictured that return, the mortification of my relatives, and the excitement of the Press; and several times I calmly deliberated with myself as to whether the best course for me to pursue would not be to drop quietly overboard some dark night, and thus prevent the degradation that would be my portion if I were taken home and placed upon my trial. However, had I but known it, I might have spared myself all this anxiety, for the future had something in store for me which I had never taken into consideration, and which was destined to upset all my calculations in a most unexpected fashion.

How strange a thing is Fate, and by what small circumstances are the currents of our lives diverted! If I had not had my match-box in my pocket on the occasion I am about to describe, what a very different tale I should have had to tell. You must bear with me if I dwell upon it, for it is the one little bit of that portion of my life that I love to remember. It all came about in this way: On the evening in question I was standing smoking against the port bulwarks between the fore rigging and the steps leading to the hurricane deck. What the exact time was I cannot remember. It may have been eight, and it might possibly have been half-past; one thing, at any rate, is certain: dinner was over in the saloon, for some of the passengers were promenading the hurricane deck. My pipe was very nearly done, and, having nothing better to do, I was beginning to think of turning in, when the second officer came out of the alley way and asked me for a match. He was a civil young fellow of two or three-and-twenty, and when I had furnished him with what he wanted, we fell into conversation. In the course of our yarning he mentioned the name of the ship upon which he had served his apprenticeship. Then, for the first time for many years, I remembered that I had a cousin who had also spent some years aboard her. I mentioned his name, and to my surprise he remembered him perfectly.

"Blakeley," he cried; "Charley Blakeley, do you mean? Why, I knew him as well as I knew any man! As fine a fellow as ever stepped. We made three voyages to China and back together. I've got a photograph of him in my berth now. Come along and see it."

On this invitation I followed him from my own part of the vessel, down the alley way, past the engine-room, to his quarters, which were situated at the end, and looked over the after spar deck that separated the poop from the hurricane

deck. When I had seen the picture I stood at the door talking to him for some minutes, and while thus engaged saw two ladies and a gentleman come out of the saloon and go up the ladder to the deck above our heads. From where I stood I could hear their voices distinctly, and could not help envying them their happiness. How different was it to my miserable lot!

Suddenly there rang out a woman's scream, followed by another, and then a man's voice shouting frantically, "Help, help! Miss Maybourne has fallen overboard."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before I had left the alley way, crossed the well, and was climbing the ladder that led to the poop. A second or two later I was at the taffrail, had thrown off my coat, mounted the rail, and, catching sight of a figure struggling among the cream of the wake astern, had plunged in after her. The whole thing, from the time the first shriek was uttered until I had risen to the surface, and was blowing the water from my mouth and looking about me for the girl, could not have taken more than twenty seconds, and yet in it I seemed to live a lifetime. Ahead of me the great ship towered up to the heavens; all round me was the black bosom of the ocean, with the stars looking down at it in their winking grandeur.

For some moments after I had come to the surface I could see nothing of the girl I had jumped overboard to rescue. She seemed to have quite disappeared. Then, while on the summit of a wave, I caught a glimpse of her, and, putting forth all my strength, swam towards her. Eternities elapsed before I reached her. When I did I came carefully up alongside, and put my left arm under her shoulders to sustain her. She was quite sensible, and, strangely enough, not in the least frightened.

"Can you swim?" I asked, anxiously, as I began to tread water.

"A little, but not very well," she answered. "I'm afraid I am getting rather tired."

"Lean upon me," I answered. "Try not to be afraid; they will lower a boat in a few moments, and pick us up."

She said no more, but fought hard to keep herself afloat. The weight upon my arm was almost more than I could bear, and I began to fear that if the rescue boat did not soon pick us up they might have their row for nothing. Then my ears caught the chirp of oars, and the voice of the second officer encouraging his men in their search for us.

"If you can hold on for another three or four minutes," I said in gasps to my companion, "all will be well."

"I will try," she answered, bravely; "but I fear I shall not be able to. My strength is quite gone."

Her clothes were sodden with water, and added greatly to the weight I had to support. Not once, but half-a-dozen times, seas, cold as ice, broke over us; and once I was compelled to let go my hold of her. When I rose to the surface again some seconds elapsed before I could find her. She had sunk, and by the time I had dived and got my arm round her again she was quite unconscious. The boat was now about thirty yards distant from us, and already the men in her had sighted us and were pulling with all their strength to our assistance. In another minute or so they would be alongside, but the question was whether I could hold out so long. A minute contained sixty seconds, and each second was an eternity of waiting.

When they were near enough to hear my voice I called to them with all my strength to make haste. I saw the bows of the boat come closer and closer, and could distinctly distinguish the hissing of the water under her bows.

"If you can hold on for a few seconds longer," shouted the officer in command, "we'll get you aboard."

I heard the men on the starboard side throw in their oars. I saw the man in the bows lean forward to catch hold of us, and I remember saying, "Lift the lady; I can hold on," and then the boat seemed to fade away, the icy cold water rose higher and higher, and I felt myself sinking down, down, down, calmly and quietly into the black sea, just fading out of life as happily as a little child falls asleep.

When I came to my senses again I found myself lying in a bunk in a cabin which was certainly not my own. The appointments were decidedly comfortable, if not luxurious; a neat white-and-gold washstand stood against the bulkhead, with a large mirror suspended above it. Under the porthole, which was shaded with a small red curtain, was a cushioned locker, and at one end of this locker a handy contrivance for hanging clothes. Two men—one a young fellow about my own age, and the other the elderly gentlemen with whom I had often seen Miss Maybourne walking--were standing beside me watching me eagerly. When they saw that I had recovered consciousness they seemed to consider it a matter for congratulation.

"So you know us again, do you?" said the younger man, whom I now recognised as the ship's doctor. "How do you feel

in yourself?"

"Not very bright just at present," I answered truthfully. "But I've no doubt I shall be all right in an hour or two." Then, when a recollection of what had occasioned my illness came over me, I said, "How is Miss Maybourne? I hope they got her on board safely?"

"Thanks to you, my dear sir, they did," said the old gentleman, who I discovered later was her uncle, as I had suspected. "I am glad to be able to tell you that she is now making rapid progress towards recovery. You must get well too, and hear what the entire ship has to say about your bravery."

"I hope they'll say nothing," I answered. "Anybody could have done it. And now, how long have I been lying here?"

"Since they brought you on board last night--about twelve hours. You were unconscious for such a long time that we were beginning to grow uneasy about you. But, thank goodness, our clever doctor here has brought you round at last."

The young medico resolved to stop this flow of flattery and small talk, so he bade me sit up and try to swallow some beef tea he had had prepared for me. With his assistance I raised myself, and when I had polished off as much of the food as I was able to manage, he made me lie down once more and try to get to sleep again. I did exactly as I was ordered, and, in less time than it takes to tell, was in the land of Nod. It was not until I was up and about again that I learnt the history of the rescue. Immediately Miss Maybourne's shriek had roused the ship, and I had sprung overboard to her assistance, the chief officer, who was on the bridge, ran to the engine-room telegraph and gave the signal to stop the vessel; the second officer by this time, with commendable activity, had accompanied the carpenter, who among others had heard the alarm, to one of the quarter boats, and had her ready for lowering by the time a crew was collected. At first they had some difficulty in discovering us, but once they did so they lost no time in picking us up. Miss Maybourne was quite unconscious when they took her from my arms, and I believe as soon as I felt myself relieved of her weight I too lost my senses and began to sink. A boat-hook, however, soon brought me to the surface. Directly we reached the ship's deck the captain gave orders that I should be conveyed to an empty cabin at the end of the saloon, and it was here that I found myself when I returned to consciousness.

For what length of time I slept after the doctor and Miss Maybourne's uncle left the cabin I cannot say. I only know that when I woke the former would not hear of my getting up as I desired to do, but bade me make the best of a bad job and remain where I was until he examined me the following morning. It must have been after breakfast that he came to see me, for I heard the bell go, and half an hour later the voices of the passengers die away as they left the table and went on deck.

"Good morning, Mr. Wrexford," he said, as he shut the door behind him and came over to the bunk. "How are you feeling to-day? Pretty well, I hope?"

"I feel quite myself again," I answered. "I want to get up. This lying in bed is dreary work."

"I daresay you find it so. Anyway, I'll not stop you from getting up now, if you're so minded; that is provided you eat a good breakfast first."

"I think I can meet you on that ground," I said with a laugh. "I'm as hungry as a hunter. I hope they're going to give me something pretty soon."

"I can satisfy you up on that point," he replied. "I saw the steward preparing the tray as I came through the saloon. Yes, you must hurry up and get on deck, for the ladies are dying to shake you by the hand. I suppose you're not aware that you are the hero of the hour?"

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said in all sincerity. "There has been a terrible lot of fuss made over a very simple action."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow, there hasn't been anything said yet. You wait till old Manstone gets hold of you. He would have said his say yesterday but for my preventing him, and ever since then he has been bottling it up for you when you're well enough to receive it."

"Who is this Mr. Manstone of whom you speak? I don't think I know him."

"Why you *must* remember, he's Miss Maybourne's uncle--the old gentleman who was in here with me yesterday when you came to your senses again. You must have seen him walking with her on deck--a fine, military-looking old chap, with a big grey moustache."

"Now that you describe him, I remember him perfectly," I said; "but I had never heard his name before. I wish you'd tell him from me that I don't want anything more said about the matter. If they want to reward me, let them do it by

forgetting all about it. They couldn't do anything that would please me more."

"Why, what a modest chap you are, to be sure," said the doctor. "Most men would want the Royal Humane Society's medal, and some would even aspire to purses of sovereigns."

"Very probably. But down on my luck, as I am, I don't want either. The less notoriety I derive, the happier man I shall be. To change the subject, I hope Miss Maybourne is better?"

"Oh, she's almost herself again now. I expect to have her up and about again to-day. Surely you will not mind receiving her thanks?"

"I should not be so churlish, I hope," I remarked; "but all the same, I would rather she said nothing about the matter. That is the worst part of doing anything a little out of the ordinary: one must always be thanked, and praised, and made a fuss of till one begins to regret ever having committed an action that could produce such disastrous results."

"Come, come, you're looking at the matter in a very dismal light, I must say," he cried. "Nine out of every ten men, I'm certain, would have given their ears for the chance you had of rescuing Agnes Maybourne. That it should have come to a man who can't appreciate his good fortune seems like the irony of Fate."

I was about to reply to his jesting speech in a similar strain when there was a tap at the door, and a steward entered bearing a tray. The smell of the food was as good as a tonic to me, and when the doctor had propped me up so that I could get at it in comfort, I set to work. He then left me to myself while he went to see his other patient--the lady of whom we had just been speaking--promising to return in a quarter of an hour to help me dress.

I had just finished my meal, and was placing the tray upon the floor in such a way that the things upon it could not be spilt if the vessel should roll, when there came another tap at the door, and in response to my cry "come in," the captain of the ship appeared, and behind him the elderly gentleman whom the doctor had described to me as Miss Maybourne's uncle, under whose care she was travelling to South Africa.

"Good morning, Mr. Wrexford," said the captain, politely, as he advanced towards me and held out his hand. "I hope you are feeling better?"

"I am perfectly well again now, thank you," I replied. "The doctor is going to let me get up in a few minutes, and then I shall be ready to return to my old quarters forward."

"And that is the very matter I have come in to see you about," said the skipper. "First, however, I must tell you what the entire ship's company, both passengers and crew, think of your bravery the night before last. It was as nobly done, sir, as anything I have ever seen, and I heartily congratulate you upon it."

"Thank you very much," I answered; "but I must really ask you to say no more about it. I have already been thanked ever so much more than I deserve."

"That could not be," impetuously broke in Mr. Manstone, who had not spoken hitherto. "On my own behalf and that of my niece I, too, thank you most heartily; and you may rest assured I shall take care that a full and proper account of it is given my brother when I reach South Africa."

"Until we do so, I hope, Mr. Wrexford," said the skipper, "that you will take up your quarters in this cabin, and consider yourself a saloon passenger. I'm sure the owners would wish it, and for my part I shall be proud to have you among us."

"And I say 'Hear, hear!' to that," added Mr. Manstone.

For a moment I hardly knew what to say. I was touched by his kindness in making the offer, but in my position I could not dream of accepting it. This notoriety was likely to do me quite enough harm as it was.

"I thank you," I said at last, "and I hope you will fully understand how grateful I am to you for the kindness which prompts the offer. But I think I will remain in my old quarters forward, if you have no objection. I am quite comfortable there; and as I made my choice on principle at the beginning, I think, with your permission, I would rather not change it now."

"But my dear sir," began the captain, "you *must* let us show our appreciation in some practical form. We could never let you off quietly, as you seem to wish."

"You have already done more than enough," I answered. "You have told me what you thought of my action, and you have also made me this offer, the value of which, you may be quite sure, I fully appreciate. I have felt compelled to decline

it, and under those circumstances I think it would be best to let the subject drop.

“You are too modest by half, Mr. Wrexford,” said Miss Maybourne’s uncle. “Far too modest.”

For some time the two gentlemen did their best to persuade me to forego my decision, but, hard as they tried, they did not succeed. There were so many reasons why I should not take up my residence among the first saloon passengers aft, and as I reviewed them in my mind, I became more than ever convinced that it would be madness for me to forego my resolution.

When they discovered that I was not to be moved they shook hands again, and then left me. Five minutes later the doctor came in to help me dress. He carried a bundle of clothes in his arms, and when he had shut the door behind him he threw them on the locker under the porthole.

“Your own clothes, I’m sorry to say, Wrexford,” he began, “are completely spoiled; so if you’ll allow me, I’m going to lend you these till you can see about some more. We are men of pretty much the same build, so what fits me should fit you, and *vice versa*. Now, if you’re ready, let me give you a hand to dress, for I want to get you on deck into the fresh air as soon as possible.”

Half an hour later I was ready to leave my cabin. The doctor’s clothes fitted me admirably, and after I had given a look round to see that I had not left anything behind me, I followed the medico out into the saloon. Fortunately, there were very few people about, but, to my horror, those who were there would insist upon shaking hands with me, and telling me what they thought of my action before they would let me escape. To add to my discomfort, when I left the saloon and passed along the spar deck towards my own quarters I had to run the gauntlet of the rest of the passengers, who clustered round me, and overwhelmed me with a chorus of congratulations on my recovery. I doubt very much if ever there was more fuss made over an act of common humanity than that made by the passengers of the *Fiji Princess* over mine. If I had saved the lives of the whole ship’s company, captain and stokers included, there could not have been more said about it.

Reaching my own quarters forward I went down to my berth, in search of a pipe and a pouch of tobacco, and when I had found them, sat myself down on the fore-hatch and began to smoke. It was a lovely morning, a merry breeze hummed in the shrouds, and the great steamer was ploughing her way along with an exhilarating motion that brought my strength back quicker than any doctor’s physic. On the bridge my old friend the second officer was pacing up and down, and when he saw me he came to the rail, and waved his hand in welcome.

The chief steward also found me out, and embraced the opportunity for telling me that my conduct reminded him of a cousin’s exploits in the Hooghly, which said narrative I felt constrained to swallow with a few grains of salt. When he left me I sat where I was and thought how pleasant it was, after all, to find that there were still people in the world with sufficiently generous natures to appreciate a fellow creature’s actions. One question, however, haunted me continually: What would the folk aboard this ship say when they knew my secret? And, above all, what would Miss Agnes Maybourne think when she should come to hear it?



CHAPTER 39. THE WRECK OF THE “FIJI PRINCESS”

That afternoon I was sitting in my usual place on the fore-hatch, smoking and thinking about our next port of call, and what a miserable figure I should cut before the ship's company if by any chance I should be arrested there, when I became conscious that someone had come along the hurricane deck and was leaning on the rails gazing down at me. I looked up, to discover that it was none other than Miss Maybourne. Directly she saw that I was aware of her presence she moved towards the ladder on the port side and came down it towards where I sat. Her dress was of some dark-blue material, probably serge, and was cut in such a fashion that it showed her beautiful figure to the very best advantage. A sweeter picture of an English maiden of gentle birth than she presented as she came down the steps it would have been difficult to find. Kindness and sincerity were the chief characteristics of her face, and I felt a thrill of pride run through me as I reflected that she owed her life to me.

When she came up to where I stood, for I had risen on seeing her approaching me, she held out her hand with a frank gesture, and said, as she looked me in the eyes:

“Mr. Wrexford, you saved my life the night before last, and this is the first opportunity I have had of expressing my gratitude to you. I cannot tell you how grateful I am, but I ask you to believe that so long as I live I shall never cease to bless you for your heroism.”

To return an answer to such a speech would not seem a difficult matter at first thought, and yet I found it harder than I would at any other time have imagined. To let her see that I did not want to be thanked, and at the same time not to appear churlish, was a very difficult matter. However, I stumbled out some sort of a reply, and then asked her how she had managed to fall overboard in that extraordinary fashion.

“I really cannot tell you,” she answered, without hesitation. “I was leaning against the rails of the hurricane deck talking to Miss Dursley and Mr. Spicer, when something behind me gave way, and then over I went backwards into the water. Oh, you can't imagine the feeling of utter helplessness that came over me as I rose to the surface and saw the great ship steaming away. Then you nobly sprang in to my assistance, and once more hope came into my heart. But for you I might now be dead, floating about in the depths of that great sea. Oh! it is an awful thought.”

She trembled like a leaf at the notion, and swept her pretty hands across her face as if to brush away the thought of such a thing.

“It was a very narrow escape,” I said. “I must confess myself that I thought the boat would never reach us. And yet how cool and collected you were!”

“It would have meant certain death to have been anything else,” she answered. “My father will be indeed grateful to you when he hears of your bravery. I am his only child, and if anything were to happen to me I don't think he would survive the shock.”

“I am very grateful to Providence for having given me such an opportunity of averting so terrible a sorrow,” I said. “But I fear, like everyone else, you attach too much importance to what I did. I simply acted as any other decent man would have done had he been placed in a similar position.”

“You do not do yourself justice,” she said. “But, at any rate, you have the satisfaction of knowing, if it is any satisfaction to you, that Agnes Maybourne owes her life to you, and that she will never forget the service you have rendered her.”

The conversation was growing embarrassing, so I turned it into another channel as soon as possible. At the same time I wanted to find out something which had been puzzling me ever since I had first seen her face, and that was where I had met her before. When I put the question she looked at me in surprise.

“Do you know, Mr. Wrexford,” she said, “that I was going to ask you that self-same question? And for rather a strange reason. On the night before we sailed, you must understand, I was sleeping at the house of an aunt who lives a few miles outside Southampton. I went to bed at ten o'clock, after a rather exciting day, feeling very tired. Almost as soon as my head was upon the pillow I fell asleep, and did not wake again until about half-past twelve o'clock, when I suddenly found myself wide awake sitting up in bed, with a man's pale and agonised face staring at me from the opposite wall. For a few moments I thought I must be still asleep and dreaming, or else seeing a phantom. Almost before I could have counted five it faded

away, and I saw no more of it. From that time forward, like yourself, I was haunted with the desire to remember if I had ever seen the man's face before, and, if so, where. You may imagine my surprise, therefore, when I found the owner of it sitting before me on the hatch of the very steamer that was to take me to South Africa. Can you account for it?"

"Not in the least," I answered. "Mine was very much the same sort of experience, only that I was wide awake and driving down a prosaic London street when it happened. I, too, was endeavouring to puzzle it out the other day when I looked up and found you standing on the deck above me. It seems most uncanny."

"It may have been a warning from Providence to us which we have not the wit to understand."

"A warning it certainly was," I said truthfully, but hardly in the fashion she meant. "And one of the most extraordinary ever vouchsafed to mortal man."

"A fortunate one for me," she answered with a smile, and then offering me her dainty little hand, she bade me "good-bye," and went up the steps again to the hurricane deck.

From that time forward I saw a good deal of Miss Maybourne; so much so that we soon found ourselves upon comparatively intimate terms. Though I believe to others she was inclined to be a little haughty, to me she was invariably kindness and courtesy itself. Nothing could have been more pleasant than her manner when we were together; and you may be very sure, after all that I had lately passed through, I could properly appreciate her treatment of me. To be taken out of my miserable state of depression, and, after so many years of ill fortune, to be treated with consideration and respect, made me feel towards her as I had never done towards a woman in my life before. I could have fallen at her feet and kissed her shoes in gratitude for the luxury of my conversation with her. It was the luckiest chance for both of us when I went aft that night to see that photograph in the second officer's cabin. Had I not been there I should in all probability never have heard Miss Maybourne's shriek as she went over the side, and in that case she would most certainly have been drowned; for I knew that, unaided and weighed down by her wet clothes as she was, she could never have kept afloat till the boat reached her. Strange as it may seem, I could not help deriving a sort of satisfaction from this thought. It was evident that my refusal to accept the captain's kind offer to take possession, for the rest of the voyage, of the vacant berth aft, had created a little surprise among the passengers. Still, I believe it prejudiced the majority in my favour. At any rate, I soon discovered that my humble position forward was to make no sort of difference in their treatment of me; and many an enjoyable pipe I smoked, and twice as many talks I had with one and another, sitting on the cable range, or leaning over the bows watching the vessel's nose cutting its way through the clear green water.

One morning, after breakfast, I was forward watching the effect just mentioned, and, as usual, thinking what my sensations would be if I should be arrested at Tenerife, when I heard footsteps behind me. On looking round I discovered Miss Maybourne and the skipper coming towards me.

"Good morning, Mr. Wrexford," said the former, holding out her hand. "What a constant student of nature you are, to be sure. Every morning lately I have seen you standing where you are now, looking across the sea. My curiosity could hold out no longer, so this morning I asked Captain Hawkins to escort me up here in order that I might ask you what you see."

"I'm afraid you will hardly be repaid for your trouble, Miss Maybourne," I answered with a smile, as the captain, after shaking hands with me and wishing me good morning, left us to speak to one of the officers who had come forward in search of him.

"But surely you must see something--King Neptune, or at least a mermaid," she persisted. "You are always watching the water."

"Perhaps I do see *something*," I answered bitterly. "Yes; I think you are right. When I look over the sea like that I am watching a man's wasted life. I see him starting on his race with everything in his favour that the world can give. I see a school career of mediocrity, and a university life devoid of any sort of success; I can see a continuity of profitless wanderings about the world in the past, and I am beginning to believe that I can make out another just commencing. Disgrace behind, and disgrace ahead; I think that is the picture I have before me when I look across the sea, Miss Maybourne. It is an engrossing, but hardly a pretty one, is it?"

"You are referring to your own life, I suppose?" she said, quietly. "Well, all I can say is that, from what I have seen of you, I should consider that you are hardly the man to do yourself justice."

"God forbid," I answered. "If I were to do that it would be impossible for me to live. No; I endeavour, as far as I am able, to forget what my past has been."

She approached a step closer to me, and placed her little white hand on my arm as it lay on the bulwark before her.

"Mr. Wrexford," she said, with an earnestness I had not hitherto noticed in her, "I hope you will not consider me impertinent if I say that I should like to know your history. Believe me, I do not say this out of any idle curiosity, but because I hope and believe that it may be in my power to help you. Remember what a debt of gratitude I owe you for your bravery the other night. I cannot believe that a man who would risk his life, as you did then, can be the sort of man you have just depicted. Do you feel that you can trust me sufficiently to tell me about yourself?"

"What there is to tell, with certain reservations, of course, you shall hear. There is no one to whom I would confess so readily as to yourself. I will not insult you by asking you to let what I tell you remain *a*, secret between us, but I *will* ask you to try not to judge me too harshly."

"You may be sure I shall not do that," she replied; and then realising what her words implied, she hung her head with a pretty show of confusion. I saw what was passing in her mind, and to help her out of her difficulty plunged into the story of my miserable career. I told her of my old home in Cornwall, of my mother's death, and my father's antipathy to me on that account. On my Eton and Oxford life I dwelt but lightly, winding up with the reason of my being "sent down," and the troubles at home that followed close upon it. I described my bush life in Australia, and told her of the great disappointment to which I had been subjected over the gold mine, suppressing Bartrand's name, and saying nothing of the hatred I had entertained for him.

"After that," I said in conclusion, "I decided that I was tired of Australia, and, having inherited a little money from my father, came home, intending to get something to do and settle down in London. But I very soon tired of England, as I tired of every other place and hence my reason for going out to seek my fortune in South Africa. Now I think I have given you a pretty good idea of my past. It's not an edifying history, is it? It seems to me a parson might moralise very satisfactorily upon it."

"It is very, very sad," she answered. "Oh, Mr. Wrexford, how bitterly you must regret your wasted opportunities."

"Regret!" I said. "The saddest word in the English language. Yes, I think I do regret."

"You only 'think?' Are you not sure? From your tale one would suppose you were very sorry."

"Yes, I think I regret. But how can I be certain? The probabilities are that if I had my chance over again I should do exactly the same. As Gordon, the Australian poet, sings:--

"For good undone, and gifts misspent and resolutions vain,
'Tis somewhat late to trouble. This I know--
I should live the same life, if I had to live again;
And the chances are I go where most men go.'

"It's not a pretty thought, perhaps, to think that one's bad actions are the outcome of a bad nature, but one is compelled to own that it is true."

"You mustn't talk like that, Mr. Wrexford," she cried; "indeed, you mustn't. In all probability you have a long life before you; and who knows what the future may have in store for you? All this trouble that you have suffered may be but to fit you for some great success in after life."

"There can never be any success for me, Miss Maybourne," I said, more bitterly than I believe I had spoken yet. "There is no chance at all of that. Success and I parted company long since, and can never be reconciled to each other again. To the end of my days I shall be a lonely, homeless man, without ambition, without hope, and without faith in any single thing. God knows I am paying dearly for all I have done and all that I have failed to do."

"But there is still time for you to retrieve everything. Surely that must be the happiest thought in this frail world of ours. God, in His mercy, gives us a chance to atone for whatever we have done amiss. Believe me, I can quite realize what you feel about yourself. But at the same time, from what I have seen of you, I expect you make more of it than it really deserves."

"No, no; I can never paint what I have done in black enough colours. I am a man eternally disgraced. You try to comfort me in your infinite compassion, but you can never take away from me, try how you will, the awful skeleton that keeps me company night and day--I mean the recollection of the past."

She looked at me with tears of compassion in her lovely eyes. I glanced at her face and then turned away and stared across the sea. Never in my life before had hope seemed so dead in my heart. Now, for the first time, I realized in all its

naked horror the effect of the dastardly deed I had committed. Henceforward I was a social leper, condemned to walk the world, crying, "Unclean! unclean!"

"I am so sorry--so very sorry for you," Miss Maybourne said, after the little pause that followed my last speech. "You cannot guess how much your story has affected me. It is so very terrible to see a man so richly endowed as yourself cast down with such despair. You *must* fight against it, Mr. Wrexford. It cannot be as bad as you think."

"I am afraid I am past all fighting now, Miss Maybourne," I answered. "But I will try, if you bid me do so."

As I spoke I looked at her again. This time her eyes met mine fearlessly, but as they did so a faint blush suffused her face.

"I bid you try," she said very softly. "God give you grace, and grant you may succeed."

"If anything can make me succeed," I replied, "it will be your good wishes. I will do my best, and man cannot do more. You have cheered me up wonderfully, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"You must not do that. I hope now I shall not see you looking any more across the sea in the same way that you were this morning. You are to cheer up, and I shall insist that you report progress to me every day. If I discover any relapse, remember, I shall not spare you, and my anger will be terrible. Now good-bye; I see my uncle signalling to me from the hurricane deck. It is time for me to read to him."

"Good-bye," I said, "and may God bless you for your kindness to one who really stood in want of it."

After that conversation I set myself to take a more hopeful view of my situation. I told myself that, provided I managed to reach my destination undetected, I would work as never man ever worked before to make an honourable place for myself among those with whom my lot should be cast. The whole of the remainder of my life I vowed, God helping me, should be devoted to the service of my fellow creatures, and then on the strength of their respect and esteem I would be able to face whatever punishment Providence should decree as the result of my sin. In the strength of this firm resolve I found myself becoming a happier man than I had been for years past.

By this time we had left Madeira behind us, and were fast approaching Tenerife. In another day and a half, at the longest calculation, I should know my fate.

That night I had been smoking for some time on the fo'c'sle, but after supper, feeling tired, had gone to my bunk at an earlier hour than usual. For some reason my dreams were the reverse of good, and more than once I woke in a fright, imagining myself in danger. To such a state of nervousness did this fright at last bring me that, unable to sleep any longer, I got out of bed and dressed myself. When I was fully attired I sought the deck, to discover a fine starlight night with a nice breeze blowing. I made my way to my usual spot forward, and, leaning on the bulwark, looked down at the sea. We were now in the region of phosphorescent water, and the liquid round the boat's cutwater sparkled and glimmered as if decked with a million diamonds. In the apex of the bows the look-out stood, while black and silent behind him the great ship showed twice its real size in the darkness. The lamps shone brilliantly from the port and starboard lighthouses, and I could just manage to distinguish the officer of the watch pacing up and down the bridge with the regularity of an automaton. There was something about the silence, and that swift rushing through the water--for we must have been doing a good sixteen knots--that was most exhilarating. For something like an hour I stood and enjoyed it. My nervousness soon left me, and to my delight I found that I was beginning to feel sleepy again. At the end of the time stated I made my way towards the ladder leading from the topgallant fo'c'sle to the spar deck, intending to go below, but just as I reached it a man appeared from the shadow of the alley way, approached the bell, and struck three strokes--half-past one--upon it. At the same instant the look-out called "All's well!" The words were scarcely out of his mouth before there was a shuddering and grinding crash forward, then a sudden stoppage and heeling over of the great craft, and after that a dead, ghastly silence, in which the beating of one's heart could be distinctly heard.

The confusion of the next few minutes can be better imagined than described. The vessel had slipped off and cleared herself from the obstruction whatever it was that had caught her, and was now going on her way again, but at reduced speed. I heard the skipper open his cabin door and run up the ladder to the bridge shouting, "What has happened?" The officer of the watch replied, but at the same instant the sailors and firemen off duty came pouring, out of the fo'c'sle shouting, "She's sinking! She's sinking!" The engine-room telegraph had meanwhile been rung, and the ship was perceptibly stopping. I stood where I was, wondering all the time what I had better do.

"Every man to his station," bellowed the skipper, coming to the rails of the bridge, and tunneling his mouth with his

hands so that his voice might be heard above the din. "Be steady, men, and remember that the first man who gives any trouble I shall shoot without warning." Then, turning to the chief officer, he signed to him to take the carpenter and hasten forward in an endeavour to ascertain the nature of the injuries the vessel had received.

By this time all the passengers were on deck, the women pale and trembling, and the men endeavouring to calm and reassure them as well as they were able. I made my way up the ladder to the hurricane deck, and as I did so felt the vessel give a heavy lurch, and then sink a little deeper in the water. A moment later the chief officer and carpenter crossed the well and hurried up the ladder to the bridge. We all waited in silence for the verdict that meant life or death to everybody.

"Ladies and gentleman," said the skipper, coming down from the bridge, after a short conversation with them, and approaching the anxious group by the chart room door, "I am sorry to have to tell you that the ship has struck a rock, and in a short time will be no longer habitable for us. I want, however, to reassure you. There is ample boat accommodation for twice the number of our ship's company, so that you need have no possible fear about leaving her. How long it will be before we must go I cannot say. There is a strong bulkhead between us and the water which may stand long enough for us to reach Tenerife, which is only about a hundred miles distant. I think, however, it would be better for us to be prepared for any emergency. The ladies will therefore remain on deck, while the gentlemen go down to their cabins and bring them such warm clothing as they can find. The night is cold, and in case we may have to take to the boats before morning it will be well for everybody to make themselves as warm as possible."

Without more ado the male portion of the passengers ran down the stairway to the saloon like so many rabbits, I following at their heels to see if I could be of assistance. Into the cabins we rushed at random, collecting such articles of apparel as we could find, and carrying them on deck with all possible haste. The necessity for speed was so great that we did not pause to make selection or to inquire as to ownership, but took what we could lay our hands on and were thankful for the find. In the cabin I entered I noticed a pair of cork jackets pushed under a bunk. I dragged them out, and heaped them on the top of the other things I had collected. Then a sudden inspiration seized me. On the rack in the saloon I had noticed a large flask. I took possession of it, and then, collecting the other things I had found, ran on deck again. I could not have been gone half a minute, but even in that short space of time a change had come over the ship. Her bows were lower in the water, and I trembled when I thought of the result of the strain on the bulkhead. I found Miss Maybourne standing just where I had first seen her, at a little distance from the others, aft of the chart-room and beside the engine-room skylight. She was fully dressed, and had a little girl of eight with her, the only daughter of a widow named Bailey, of whom she was very fond.

"Miss Maybourne," I cried, throwing down the things I had brought on the deck as I spoke, and selecting a thick jacket from the heap, "I found these clothes in a cabin. I don't know who they belong to, but you must put on as much as you can wear."

She obeyed me willingly enough, and when I had buttoned the last garment up I insisted on her putting on one of the cork lifebelts. As soon as she was clothed I put another garment on the child, and then attached the second lifebelt to her body. It was too big for her to wear, but fastened round her shoulders I knew it would answer the same purpose.

"But yourself, Mr. Wrexford?" cried Miss Maybourne, who saw my condition. "You must find a cork jacket for yourself, or you will be drowned."

At the very instant that I was going to answer her the vessel gave a sudden pitch, and before the boats could be lowered or anything be done for the preservation of the passengers, she began to sink rapidly. Seeing that it was hopeless to wait for the boats, I dragged my two companions to the ladder leading to the after spar deck. When I reached it, I tore down the rail just at the spot where Miss Maybourne had fallen overboard on the Spanish coast a few nights before, and, this done, bade them jump into the sea without losing time. Miss Maybourne did so without a second thought; the child, however, hung back, and cried piteously for mercy. But, with the ship sinking so rapidly under us, to hesitate I knew was to be lost, so I caught her by the waist, and, regardless of her screams, threw her over the side. Then, without waiting to see her rise again, I dived in myself. The whole business, from the moment of the first crash to the tune of our springing overboard, had not lasted five minutes. One thing was self-evident--the bulkhead could not have possessed the strength with which it had been credited.

On coming to the surface again I shook myself and looked about me. Behind me was the great vessel, with her decks by this time almost on a level with the water. In another instant she would be gone. True enough, before I had time to take

half a dozen strokes there was a terrific explosion, and next instant I was being sucked down and down by the sinking ship. How far I went, or how long I was beneath the waves, I have no possible idea. I only know that if it had lasted much longer I should never have lived to reach the surface again or to tell this tale. But after a little while I found myself rising to the surface, surrounded by wreckage of all sorts and descriptions.

On reaching the top, I looked about me for the boats, which I felt sure I should discover; but, to my surprise, *I* could not distinguish one. Was it possible that the entire company of the vessel could have gone down with her? The thought was a terrible one, and almost unnerved me. I raised myself in the water as well as I was able, and as I did so I caught sight of two people within a few yards of me. I swam towards them, and to my joy discovered that they were Miss Maybourne and the child upon whom I had fastened the cork life-preservers a few minutes before.

"Oh, Mr. Wrexford," cried Miss Maybourne, in an agonised voice. "What are we to do? This poor child is either dead, or nearly so, and I can see no signs of any boat at all."

"We must continue swimming for a little while," I answered, "and then we may perhaps be picked up. Surely we cannot be the only survivors?"

"My poor, poor uncle!" she cried. "Can he have perished! Oh, it is too awful!"

The cork lifebelts were keeping them up famously, and on that score I felt no anxiety at all. But still the situation was about as desperate as it well could be. I had not the least notion of where we were, and I knew that unless we were picked up we should be better drowned at once than continue to float until we died of starvation. However, *I* was not going to frighten my only conscious companion by such gloomy anticipations, so I passed my arm round the child's waist and bade Miss Maybourne strike out for the spot where the ill-fated *Fiji Princess* had gone down. At the same time *I* asked her to keep her eyes open for a boat, or at least a spar of some sort, upon which we could support ourselves until we could find some safer refuge. On the horrors of that ghastly swim it will not be necessary for me to dilate. I must leave my readers to imagine them for themselves. Suffice it that for nearly a quarter of an hour we paddled aimlessly about here and there. But look as we might, not a sign of any other living soul from aboard that ship could we discover, nor anything large enough upon which three people could rest. At last, just as I was beginning to despair of saving the lives of those whom Providence had so plainly entrusted to my care, I saw ahead of us a large white object, which, upon nearer approach, proved to be one of the overturned lifeboats. I conveyed the good news to Miss Maybourne, and then, with a new burst of energy, swam towards it and caught hold of the keel. She was a big craft, and, to my delight, rode high enough out of the water to afford us a resting-place. To pull myself and the child I carried on to her, and to drag Miss Maybourne up after me, was the work of a very few moments. Once there, we knew we were safe for the present.



CHAPTER 40. THE SALVAGES.

FOR some minutes we lay upon the bottom of the up-turned boat too exhausted to speak. I still held the unconscious form of little Esther Bailey in my arms, and protected her, as well as I was able, from the marauding seas. Though the waves about us upheld many evidences of the terrible catastrophe, such as gratings, broken spars, portions of boat gear, still, to my astonishment, I could discover no signs of any bodies. Once, however, I was successful in obtaining possession of something which I knew would be worth its weight in gold to us: it was an oar, part of the equipment of one of the quarter boats I imagined; half the blade was missing, but with what remained it would still be possible for us to propel the boat on which we had taken refuge.

What a terrible position was ours, lodged on the bottom of that overturned lifeboat, icy seas breaking upon us every few seconds, the knowledge of our gallant ship, with all our friends aboard, lying fathoms deep below the surface of the waves, and the remembrance that the same fate might be ours at any moment; no possible notion of where we were, no provisions or means of sustaining life, and but small chance of being picked up by any passing boat!

It was Miss Maybourne who spoke first, and, as usual, her conversation was not about herself.

"Mr. Wrexford," she said, and her teeth chattered as she spoke, "at any risk something must be done for that poor child you hold in your arms, she will die else. Do you think we could manage to get her up further on to the boat and then try to chafe her back to consciousness?"

"By all means let us try," I answered, "though I fear it will prove a difficult matter. She seems very far gone, poor little mite."

With the utmost care I clambered further up the boat till I sat with my burden astride the keel. In the darkness we could scarcely see each other, but once the child was placed between us we set to work rubbing her face and hands and trying by every means in our power to restore consciousness. Suddenly a great thought occurred to me. I remembered the flask I had taken from the cabin where I had found the clothes. In an instant I had dived my hand into my pocket in search of it, almost trembling with fear lest by any chance it should have slipped out when I had dived overboard, but to my delight it was still there. I had pulled it out and unscrewed the stopper before anyone could have counted a dozen, taking the precaution to taste it in order to see that it was all right before I handed it to Miss Maybourne. It was filled with the finest French brandy, and, having discovered this, I bade her take a good drink at it. When she had done so I put it to the child's mouth and forced a small quantity between her lips.

"Surely you are going to drink some yourself," said my companion, as she saw me screw on the top and replace it in my pocket.

But I was not going to do anything of the sort. I did not need it so vitally as my charges, and I knew that there was not enough in the bottle to justify me in wasting even a drop. I explained this and then asked her if she felt any warmer.

"Much warmer," she answered, "and I think Esther here feels better too. Let us chafe her hands again."

We did so, and in a few minutes had the satisfaction of hearing the poor mite utter a little moan. In less than an hour she was conscious once more, but so weak that it seemed as if the first breath of wind that came our way would blow the life out of her tiny body. Poor little soul, if it was such a terrible experience for us, what must it have been for her?

What length of time elapsed from the time of our heading the boat before daylight came to cheer us I cannot say, but, cramped up as we were, the darkness seemed to last for centuries. For periods of something like half an hour at a time we sat without speaking, thinking of all that had happened since darkness had fallen the night before, and remembering the rush and agony of those last few dreadful minutes on board, and the awful fact that all those whom we had seen so well and strong only a few hours before were now cold and lifeless for ever. Twice I took out my flask and insisted on Miss Maybourne and the child swallowing a portion of the spirit. Had I not brought that with me, I really believe neither of them would have seen another sunrise.

Suddenly Miss Maybourne turned to me.

"Listen, Mr. Wrexford," she cried. "What is that booming noise? Is it thunder?"

I did as she commanded, but for some moments could hear nothing save the splashing of the waves upon the boat's

planks. Then a dull, sullen noise reached my ears that might very well have been mistaken for the booming of thunder at a great distance. Thunder it certainly was, but not of the kind my companion imagined. It was the thunder of surf, and that being so, I knew there must be land at no great distance from us. I told her my conjecture, and then we set ourselves to wait, with what patience we could command, for daylight.

What a strange and, I might almost say, weird dawn that was! It was like the beginning of a new life under strangely altered conditions. The first shafts of light found us still clinging to the keel of the overturned boat, gazing hopelessly about us. When it was light enough to discern our features, we two elder ones looked at each other, and were horrified to observe the change which the terrible sufferings of the night had wrought in our countenances. Miss Maybourne's face was white and drawn, and she looked years older than her real age. I could see by the way she glanced at me that I also was changed. The poor little girl Esther hardly noticed either of us, but lay curled up as close as possible to her sister in misfortune.

As the light widened, the breeze, which had been just perceptible all night, died away, and the sea became as calm as a mill pond. I looked about me for something to explain the noise of breakers we had heard, but at first could see nothing. When, however, I turned my head to the west I almost shouted in my surprise, for, scarcely a mile distant from us, was a comparatively large island, surrounded by three or four reef-like smaller ones. On the larger island a peak rose ragged and rough to a height of something like five hundred feet, and upon the shore, on all sides, I could plainly discern the surf breaking upon the rocks. As soon as I saw it I turned excitedly to Miss Maybourne.

"We're saved!" I cried, pointing in the direction of the island; "look there--look there!"

She turned round on the boat as well as she was able and when she saw the land, stared at it for some moments in silence. Then with a cry, "Thank God!" she dropped her head on to her hands and I could see her shoulders shaken by convulsive sobs. I did my best to console her, but she soon recovered of her own accord, and addressed herself to me again.

"These must be the Salvage Islands of which the captain was speaking at dinner last night," she said. "How can we reach the shore? Whatever happens, we must not drift past them."

"Have no fear," I answered; "I will not let that happen, come what may."

So saying, I shifted my position to get a better purchase of the water, and then using the broken oar began to paddle in the direction of the biggest island. It was terribly hard work, and a very few moments showed me that after all the horrors of the night I was as weak as a kitten. But by patience and perseverance I at last got the boat's head round and began to lessen the distance that separated us. At the end of nearly half an hour we were within an hundred yards of the shore. By this time I had decided on a landing-place. It was a little bit of open sandy beach, perhaps sixty yards long, without rocks, and boasting less surf than any other part of the island I could see. In addition to these advantages it was nearer, and I noted that that particular side of the island looked more sheltered than the others.

Towards this haven of refuge I accordingly made my way, hoping that I should not find any unexpected danger lurking there when I should be too close in to be able to get out again. It was most necessary for every reason that we should save the boat from damage, for by her aid alone could we hope to make our way out to passing ships, or, if the worst came, to strike out on our own account for the Canary Islands. That the rocks we were now making were the Salvage Group, as Miss Maybourne had said, I had no doubt in my own mind, though how the skipper came to be steering such a course was more than I could tell.

At last we were so close that I could see the sandy bottom quite distinctly only a fathom or so below us. A better landing-place no man could have wished for. When we were near enough to make it safe I slid off the boat into the water, which was just up to my hips, and began to push her in before me. Having grounded her I took Miss Maybourne in my arms and carried her out of the water up on to the beach and then went back for the child. My heart was so full of gratitude at being on dry land again and having saved the two lives entrusted to my care that I could have burst into tears on the least encouragement.

Having got my charges safely ashore, I waded into the water again to have a look at the boat and, if possible, to discover what had made her capsize. She was so precious to us that I dared not leave her for an instant. To my delight she looked as sound as the day she had been turned out of the shipwright's yard, and I felt if once I could turn her over she would carry us as well as any boat ever built. But how to do that, full of water as she was, was a problem I could not for the life of me solve. Miss Maybourne's wits, however, were sharper than mine and helped me out of the difficulty.

"There is a rope in her bows, Mr. Wrexford," she cried; "why not drive the oar into the sand and fasten her to that?"

then when the tide goes out--you see it is nearly full now--she will be left high and dry, the water will have run out of her, and then you will be able to do whatever you please to her."

"You've solved the difficulty for me in a very simple fashion," I answered. "What a duffer I was not to have thought of that."

"The mouse can help the lion sometimes, you see," she replied, with a wan little smile that went to my heart.

Having got my party safely ashore, and made my boat fast to the oar, as proposed by Miss Maybourne, the next thing to be done was to discover a suitable spot where we might fix our camp, and then to endeavour to find some sort of food upon which we might sustain our lives until we should be rescued. I explained my intentions to my elder companion, and then, leaving them on the beach together, climbed the hillside to explore. On the other sides of the island the peak rose almost precipitously from the beach, and upon the side on which we stood it was, in many places, pretty stiff climbing. At last, however, to my great delight, on a small plateau some thirty yards long by twenty deep, I discovered a cave that looked as if it would suit my purpose to perfection. It was not a large affair, but quite big enough to hold the woman and the child even when lying at full length. To add to my satisfaction, the little strip of land outside was covered with a coarse grass, a quantity of which I gathered and spread about in the cave to serve as a bed. This, with a few armfuls of dry seaweed, which I knew I should be able to obtain on the beach, made an excellent couch.

What, however, troubled me more than anything else, was the fear that the island might contain no fresh water. But my doubts on that head were soon set at rest, for on the hillside, a little below the plateau on which I had discovered the cave, was a fair-sized pool, formed by a hollow in a rock, which, when I tasted it, I found to contain water, a little brackish it is true, but still quite drinkable. There was an abundance of fuel everywhere, and if only I could manage to find some shell fish on the rocks, or hit upon some way of catching the fish swimming in the bay, I thought we might manage to keep ourselves alive until we were picked up by some passing boat.

Descending to the beach again, I told Miss Maybourne of my discoveries, and then taking poor little Esther in my arms we set off up the hill towards the cave. On reaching it I made them as comfortable as I could and then descended to the shore again in search of food.

Leaving the little sandy bay where we had landed, I tramped along as far as some large rocks I could see a couple of hundred yards or so to my left hand. As I went I thought of the strangeness of my position. How inscrutable are the ways of Providence! However much I might have hated Bartrand, had I not met Nikola I should in all probability never have attempted to revenge myself on him. In that case I should not have been compelled to fly from England at a moment's notice, and should certainly not have sailed aboard the *Fiji Princess*. Presuming, therefore, that all would have gone on without me as it had done with me, Miss Maybourne would have been drowned off the coast of Spain, and the *Fiji Princess* would have gone to the bottom and nobody have been left to tell the tale. It was a curious thought, and one that sent a strange thrill through me to think what good had indirectly resulted from my misfortune.

Reaching the rocks mentioned above, I clambered on to them and began my search for limpets. Once more Fate was kind to me. The stones abounded with the mollusks, the majority of which were of larger sizes than I had met with in my life before. In considerably less than five minutes I had detached a larger supply than our little party would be able to consume all day.

My harvest gathered, I filled my handkerchief and set off for the plateau again. About half-way I looked up, to find Miss Maybourne standing at the cave mouth watching me. Directly she saw me approaching, she waved her hand to encourage me, and that little gesture set my heart beating like a wheat-flail. It was the first dawning of a knowledge that was soon to give me the greatest pain I had ever yet known in my life.

On reaching the plateau, I hastened towards her and placed my spoils at her feet.

"Fortune is indeed kind to us," I said. "See what splendid limpets I have obtained from the rocks down yonder. I was beginning to be afraid lest there should be nothing edible on the island."

"But how are we to cook them?" she answered, with a little shudder, for I must confess the things did not look appetising. "I could not eat them raw."

"I have no intention that you shall," I cried, reassuringly. "I am going to light a fire and cook them for you."

"But how can you light a fire? Have you any matches dry enough?"

I took from my waistcoat pocket a little Japanese match-box, the lid of which closed with a strong spring, and opened

it in some trepidation. So much depended on the discovery I was about to make. With a trembling hand I pressed back the lid, and tipped the contents into my palm. Fortunately, the strength of the spring and the tight fit of the cover rendered the box almost water-tight, and for this reason the dozen or so matches it contained were only a little damp. In their present state, however, they were quite useless.

"I think," I said, turning them over and examining them closely, "that if I place them in a dry spot they will soon be fit for use."

"Let me do it for you," she said, holding out her hand. "You have done everything so far. Why should I not be allowed to help you?"

"I shall be only too glad to let you," I answered. "I want to cut the fish out of their shells and prepare them for the fire."

So saying, I handed over the precious matches to her care; and then, taking my clasp knife from my pocket, set about my work. When it was finished, and I had prepared an ample meal for three people, I placed it in a safe place in the cave, and then set about collecting a supply of fuel for the fire.

When this work was done I determined to climb to a point of vantage and search the offing for a sail. Just as I was starting, however, Miss Maybourne called to me to know where I was going. I informed her of my errand, and she immediately asked permission to accompany me. I told her that I should be very glad of her company, and when she had looked into the cave at the little child, who was still fast asleep, we set off together.

From the encampment we climbed the hillside for a hundred feet or so, and then, reaching another small plateau, turned our attention to the sea. Side by side we looked across the expanse of blue water for the sail that was to bring deliverance to us. But no sign of any vessel could be seen--only a flock of seagulls screeching round the rocks below us, and another wheeling roundabout in the blue sky above our heads.

"Nothing there," I said bitterly. "Not a single sail of any kind."

A fit of anger, as sudden as the squall that ruffles the surface of a mountain lake, rose in my breast against Fate. I shook my fist fiercely at the plane of water softly heaving in the sunlight, and but for my companion's presence could have cursed our fate aloud. I suppose Miss Maybourne must have understood, for she came a little closer to me and laid her hand soothingly upon my arm.

"Mr. Wrexford," she said, "surely you who have hitherto been so brave are not going to give way now, just because we cannot see a ship the first time we look for one. No! No! I know you too well, and I cannot believe that."

"You shame me, Miss Maybourne," I replied, recovering myself directly. "Upon my word, you do. I don't know what made me give way like that. I am worse than a baby."

"I won't have you call yourself names either. It was because you are tired and a little run down," she answered. "You have done too much. Oh, Mr. Wrexford, I want you to grant me a favour. I want you to kneel with me while I thank God for His great mercy in sparing our lives. We owe everything to Him. Without His help where should we be now?"

"I will kneel with you with pleasure," I said, "if you wish it, but I am not worthy. I have been too great a sinner for God to listen to me."

"Hush! I cannot let you say that," she went on. "Whatever your past may have been, God will hear you and forgive you if you pray aright. Remember, too, that in my eyes you have atoned for all your past by your care of us last night. Come, let us kneel down here."

So saying, she dropped on to her knees on that little plateau, and without a second's hesitation I followed her example. It must have been a strange sight for the gulls, that lovely girl and myself kneeling, side by side, on that windy hillside. Overhead rose the rugged peak of the mountain, below us was the surf-bound beach, and on all sides the treacherous sea from which we had so lately been delivered. What were the exact words of the prayer Miss Maybourne sent up to the Throne of Grace I cannot now remember; I only know it seemed to me the most beautiful expression of thankfulness for the past, and supplication for guidance and help in the future that it would be possible for a human being to give utterance to. When she had finished we rose, and having given a final glance round, went down the hill again. On reaching our camping-place she went to the cave to ascertain how little Esther was, while I sought the spot where she had set the matches to dry. To my delight they were now ready for use. So placing them back in my box as if they were the greatest treasures I possessed on earth--as they really were just then--I went across to the fire I had built up. Then striking one of the matches upon a stone I lit the grass beneath the sticks, and in less time than it takes to tell had the satisfaction of

seeing a fine bonfire blazing before me. This done, I crossed to the cave to obtain the fish I had placed there.

On entering, I discovered Miss Maybourne kneeling beside the child.

"How is she now?" I enquired, surprised at discovering the poor little mite still asleep upon the bed of grass.

"She is unconscious again," answered Miss Maybourne, large tears standing in her beautiful eyes as she spoke. "Oh, Mr. Wrexford, what can we do to save her life?"

"Alas! I cannot tell," I replied. "Shall we give her some more brandy? I have still a little left in the flask."

"We might try it," she said. "But I fear it will not be much use. What the poor little thing needs most is a doctor's science and proper nursing. Oh! if I only knew what is really the matter, I might be able to do something for her. But, as it is, I feel powerless to help her at all."

"At any rate, let us try the effect of a few sips of this," I said, as I took the flask from my pocket. "Even if it does no good, it cannot possibly do any harm."

I knelt beside her, and having opened the little child's mouth, poured into it a few drops of the precious spirit. We then set to work and chafed her hands as briskly as possible, and in a few minutes were rewarded by seeing the mite open her eyes and look about her.

"Thank God," said Miss Maybourne, devoutly. "Oh, Esther darling, do you know me? Do you remember Aggie?"

To show that she understood what was said to her, the little one extended her hand and placed it in that of her friend. The action was so full of trust and confidence that it brought the tears to my eyes.

"How do you feel now, darling?" asked her friend, as she lifted the little sufferer into a more comfortable position.

"A pain here," faltered Esther, placing her hand on the side of her head. Then looking round the cave as if in search of someone, she said, "Miss Maybourne, where is mother?"

At this point my pluck forsook me altogether, and seizing the fish for which I had come, I dashed from the cave without waiting to hear what answer the brave girl would give her. When she joined me, ten minutes later, large tears were running down her cheeks. She made no attempt to hide them from me, but came across to where I knelt by the fire, and said, in a choking voice:

"I have been preparing that poor child for the sad news she must soon hear, and I cannot tell you how miserable it has made me. Do you really think in your own heart that we are the only people who escaped from that ill-fated vessel? Isn't it just possible that some other boat may have been lowered, and that the child's mother may be among those who got away in her? Tell me exactly what you think, without hiding anything from me, I implore you."

"Of course it may be *just* possible, as you say, that a boat *did* get away; but I must confess that I think it is most, unlikely. Had such a thing occurred, we should have been almost certain to have seen her, and in that case we should have been able to attract her attention, and she would have picked us up. No, Miss Maybourne. I wish I could comfort you with such an assurance; but I fear it would be cruel to buoy you up with any false hopes, only to have them more cruelly shattered later on. I'm afraid we must accustom ourselves to the awful thought that the *Fiji Princess* and all her company, with the exception of ourselves, have met a watery grave. Why I should have been saved when so many worthier people perished I cannot imagine."

"To save us, Mr. Wrexford," she answered. "Think what you are saying, and remember that but for you we should not be here now."

"I thank God, then, for the opportunity He gave me," I answered; and what I said I meant from the very bottom of my heart.

Whatever she may have thought of my speech, she vouchsafed no reply to it; but on looking up a moment later, I discovered that her face was suffused with a beautiful blush that was more eloquent than any words. After that I turned my attention to the meal which I was preparing, and gave her time to recover herself a little.

Having no pot in which to cook the fish, I had to use the largest of the shells I had discovered. These did not prove altogether a good substitute, but as they were all I had got, I had to make the best of them or go without.

When the mussels were sufficiently done, I lifted them off the fire and invited my companion to taste the dish. She did so, and the grimace which followed told me that she was not overpleased at the result. I followed her example, and felt obliged to confess that they made but poor fare to support life upon.

"If we cannot get something better, I don't know what we shall do," she cried. "These things are too horrible."

"Perhaps I may be able to hit upon a way of catching some fish," I said; "or it is just possible I may be able to get a trap and catch some birds. There is no knowing what I may not be able to do with a little practice. In the meantime, you must endeavour to swallow as much of this mess as possible, and try to get the little one in the cave there to do the same."

Putting some of the fish into another shell, I gave it to her, and she carried it off to her sick friend. After I had scraped and washed it carefully, I filled a larger shell with pure water from the pool and gave it to them to drink. When they had finished their meal--and it was not much that they ate--I called Miss Maybourne outside and informed her that I was going to build up a large fire, after which I should set off on a tramp round the island to see if I could discover anything better to eat. While I was away, I advised her to dry her own and the child's things by the blaze, for though we had been some time under the influence of the hot sun, still our garments could not be said to be anything like dry. She promised to do as I wished, and when I had piled what remained of my heap of fuel upon the fire I made my way down to the shore, and then set off for a tramp round the island.

My first call was at the group of rocks from which I had gathered the shellfish of which my companion had so strongly disapproved. I wanted to see if I could discover a place where it would be possible for me to construct some sort of a trap for fish. But though I searched diligently, nothing suitable could I find. At last I had to give it up in despair, and set my brain to work on another plan for stocking my larder. That fish were plentiful I could see by looking over the edges of the rocks, but how I was to capture them was by no means so plain. I think at that moment I would have given a year of my life for the worst hook and line I had used as a boy among the sticklebacks of Polton Penna.

Leaving the rocks behind me, I turned the point and made for the brow of a low hill that overlooked the sea on the further side. I had noticed that the sea birds gathered here in greater numbers than elsewhere, and when I reached the cliff, to my surprise and delight, I found the ground literally covered with nests. Indeed, it was a matter of some difficulty to move without treading upon the eggs. My delight can scarcely be overestimated, for here was a new food supply, and one that, while it would be unlikely to give out for some weeks to come, would be infinitely preferable to the wretched limpets upon which we had almost made up our minds we should have to subsist. I hastened to fill my handkerchief and pockets with the spoil, and when I could stuff in no more, continued my walk in a much easier, and consequently more thankful, frame of mind.

As I tramped along, glancing ever and anon at the sea, the sordid details of my past life rose before me. When I considered it, I felt almost staggered by the change that had come over me. It seemed scarcely possible that so short a time could have passed since I had plotted against Bartrand and had been so miserable in London. In my present state of usefulness, I felt as if centuries had elapsed since then, instead of barely a couple of weeks, as was really the case. I wondered what would be said in England when the news got into the papers, as I supposed it inevitably must, that I had found a watery grave in the ill-fated *Fiji Princess*. Would there be anyone to regret me? I very much doubted it. One hope occurred to me. Perhaps, under cover of the supposition that I was dead, I might manage to outwit the law after all, and then an opportunity would be afforded me of beginning a new life in a strange land--the land that was the home of Agnes Maybourne.

From a consideration of this important chance I fell to thinking of the girl herself. Could it have been for the reason that I was ultimately to save her life that Fate had raised her face before my eyes to warn me that miserable night in London? It looked very much like it. If, however, that was the beginning, what was the sequel to be? for surely it could not be intended that Fate, having brought me so far, should suddenly abandon me at the end. "Oh! if I were only clean handed like my fellow-men," I cried, in miserable self-abasement, "how happy might I not be!" For I must mention here that in my own mind I had quite come to the conclusion that Agnes Maybourne entertained a liking for me. And, God knows, I on my side had discovered that I loved her better than my own soul. What was to be the end of it all? That the future alone could decide.

The other side of the island--that is to say, the side exactly opposite that upon which we had landed--was almost precipitous, and at the foot of the cliffs, extending for some distance out into the sea, were a number of small islets, upon which the seas broke with never-easing violence. I searched that offing, as I had done the other, for a sail, but was no better rewarded. As soon as I had made certain that there was nothing in sight, I turned upon my tracks and hastened back to the plateau as fast as I could go. For some reason or another, I experienced a great dread lest by any chance something ill might have befallen my charges. But when I reached the beach below the plateau and looked up, to see the fire still burning

brightly and Miss Maybourne moving about between it and the cave, I was reassured.

The tide by this time had gone out, and the lifeboat lay high and dry upon the beach. Before rejoining my companions I made my way towards her.

To roll her over into her proper position was only a matter of small difficulty now that the water was out of her, and once this was accomplished I was able to satisfy myself as to her condition. As far as I could gather, there was nothing amiss with her, even her oars lay fastened to the thwarts as usual. How she could have got into the water was a mystery I could not solve for the life of me. I examined her most carefully, and having done so, found some pieces of wood to act as rollers, and dragged her up the beach till I had got her well above high water mark. After that I picked up my parcel of eggs and climbed the hill to the plateau. It was now well on into the afternoon, and I had still much to do before nightfall.'

When I showed Miss Maybourne the eggs I had found, she expressed her great satisfaction, and we immediately cooked a couple to be ready against the little sufferer's waking.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in carrying drift wood from the beach to the plateau; for I had determined to keep a good flare burning all night, in case any ships might happen to pass, and think it worth their while to stand off and on till daylight should show them the reason of it. When I had stacked it ready to my hand there was yet another supply of grass to be cut, with which to improve the bed-places in the cave. Then my own couch had to be prepared somewhere within call. After which there was the evening meal to cook. By the time this was done, darkness had fallen, and our first night on the island had commenced.

When I bade Miss Maybourne "good night" she was kind enough to express her thanks a second time for the trouble I had taken. As if the better to give point to her gratitude, she held out her hand to me. I took it and raised it to my lips. She did not attempt to stop me, and then, with another "good night," she passed into the cave, and I was left alone.

For hours I sat watching my blaze and listening to the rumbling of the surf upon the shore. The night was as still as a night could well be. Not even a breath of wind was stirring. When I laid myself down in my corner between the rocks near the cave's mouth, and fell asleep, it was to dream of Agnes Maybourne and the happiness that might have been mine but for the one dread thing which had made it quite impossible.



CHAPTER 41. A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT.

LONG before daylight I was awake, thinking of our unenviable position, and wishing for the ladies' sakes that I could do something to improve it. But, as far as I could see, I had done everything that was possible by mortal man. Somehow, though I valued their eggs above gold, I had no fancy for the sea birds themselves. What I wanted most was a contrivance with which to capture some of the fish in the bay. A line I could easily make by unravelling the painter of the lifeboat; the hook, however, beat me. A hair-pin would have done admirably; but, unfortunately, Miss Maybourne's hair covered her shoulders just as she had run up from her cabin on hearing the first alarm. An ordinary pin would have been invaluable; but among the three of us we could not muster even one. Just as daylight broke, however, I solved my difficulty in the simplest fashion possible, and could have kicked myself round the island, if it had been possible, for my stupidity in not having thought of it sooner. In my tie I wore a long gold pin, with an escutcheon top, which had been given me in Australia years before. The remembrance of it no sooner came into my mind than I had whipped it out of the tie, and had bent the point into a fair-sized hook. This done, I rose from my couch between the rocks, and having replenished the fire, which still showed a red glow, hastened down the hillside to where the boat lay upon the sands. From the painter I extracted sufficient strands to make a line some thirty feet long, and to this I attached my hook. I very much doubt if a fish were ever honoured before with so grand a hook.

Just as the sun's first rays were shooting up beyond the placid sea line, and the sea and heavens were fast changing from a pure pearl grey to every known colour of the rainbow, I pushed the boat into the water, and rowed out for half a mile or so. Then, having baited my hook with mussel, I threw it overboard, and seating myself, line in hand, in the stern, awaited results. I looked at the island, showing so clear and rugged in the bright morning light, and thought of Miss Maybourne and the sick child. If the truth must be confessed, I believe I was happier then, even in such straits and upon so inhospitable a shore, than I had ever been before. When I thought of Bartrand, as I had last seen him, lying stretched out in the snow in that quiet street, and remembered my struggle with Nikola in Golden Square, my walk through sleeping London to Surbiton, and my journey to Southampton, it all seemed like some horrible dream, the effects of which I was at last beginning to rid myself. It was hard to believe that I had really gone through it all; that I, the man now fishing so quietly in this boat, in whom Miss Maybourne believed so much, was in reality Gilbert Pennethorne, the perpetrator of one of the mysterious murders which had entirely baffled the ingenuity of the London police. I could not help wondering what she would say if anyone should tell her the true history of the man in whom she placed such implicit confidence. Would she credit it or not?

While I was thinking of this, I felt a sharp tug upon my line, and when I drew it in, I found, to my delight, a nice fish impaled upon the hook. Having released him and placed him securely at the bottom of the boat, I did not lose a moment in throwing the line overboard again. Within a quarter of an hour I had landed five splendid fellows, and was as pleased with my success as if I had just been created Lord Chancellor of England. To-day, at any rate, I told myself, Miss Maybourne and the little girl should have a nice breakfast.

Arriving at the beach I sprang out, and, using the same means as before, drew my boat up out of reach of the tide. Then, taking my prizes with me, I made my way up the hillside to the plateau. Just as I reached it, Miss Maybourne made her appearance from the cave and came towards me.

"Look!" I cried, holding up the fish as I spoke. "Are these not beauties?"

"They are indeed splendid," she answered. "But how did you manage to obtain them? I thought you said last night that you could think of no way of making a hook?"

"So I did. But since then I have remembered the gold pin I wore in my tie. I found that it made a most excellent hook, and with its assistance I managed to get hold of these gentlemen. But, in my triumph, I am forgetting to enquire how you and your little friend are this morning. You were fairly comfortable in the cave, I hope?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you," she answered, gravely. "But poor little Esther is no better this morning. In fact, if anything, I fancy she is worse. She was delirious for some time in the night, and now she is in a comatose condition that frightens me more than her former restlessness. It goes to my heart to see her in this state."

"Is there nothing we can do for her, I wonder?" I said, as I prepared my fish for the fire.

"I fear we are powerless," replied Miss Maybourne. "The only thing I can imagine to be the matter with her is that she must have been struck by something when we were sucked under by the sinking ship. She complains continually of pains in her head."

"In that case, I fear there is nothing for it but to wait patiently for some ship, with a doctor on board, to come in sight and take us off."

"In the meantime, she may die. Oh, poor little Esther! Mr. Wrexford, this helplessness is too terrible."

What could I say to comfort her? In my own mind I saw no hope. Unless a vessel hove in sight, and she chanced to carry a doctor, the child must inevitably die. As soon as the breakfast was cooked, I went into the cave and looked at her. I found the little thing stretched upon the grass I had thrown down for a bed. She was unconscious, as Miss Maybourne had said, and was breathing heavily. Her pulse was almost unnoticeable, and occasionally she moaned a little, as if in pain. It was a sight that would have touched the most callous of men, and in spite of that one sinister episode in my career, I was far from being such a hero.

At midday there was no change perceptible in her condition. By the middle of the afternoon she was worse. Miss Maybourne and myself took it in turns to watch by her side; in the intervals, we climbed the hill and scanned the offing for a sail. Our vigilance, however, was never rewarded--the sea was as devoid of ships as our future seemed of hope.

After a day which had seemed an eternity, the second night of our captivity on the island came round. A more exquisite evening could scarcely be imagined. I had been watching by the sick child's side the greater part of the afternoon, and feeling that, if I remained on shore, Miss Maybourne would discover how low-spirited I was, I took the boat and rowed out into the bay, to try and obtain some fish for our supper. This was not a matter of much difficulty, and in less than a quarter of an hour I had hauled on board more than we could possibly have eaten in three meals. When I had finished, I sat in my boat watching the sunset effects upon the island. It was indeed a scene to remember, and the picture of it, as I saw it then, rises before me now as clearly as if it were but yesterday.

To right and left of the points which sheltered the bay, the deep green of the sea was changed to creaming froth, where the surf caught the rocks; but in the little indentation which we had made our home the wavelets rippled on the sand with the softest rhythm possible. The sky was cloudless, the air warmer than it had been for days past. The glow of sunset imparted to the western cliffs a peculiar shade of pink, the beauty of which was accentuated by the deep shadows cast by the beetling crags. On the hillside, directly opposite where my boat was anchored, I could see the plateau, and on it my fire burning brightly. I thought of the brave woman nursing the sick child in the cave, and of the difference she had made in my lonely life.

"Oh, God!" I cried, "if only You had let me see the chance that was to be mine some day, how easy it would have been for me to have ordered Nikola and his temptation to stand behind me. Now I see my happiness too late, and am consequently undone for ever."

As I thought of that sinister man and the influence he had exercised upon my life, I felt a thrill of horror pass over me. It seemed dreadful to think that he was still at large, unsuspected, and in all probability working some sort of evil on another unfortunate individual.

In my mind's eye I could see again that cold, impassive face, with its snake-like eyes, and hear that insinuating voice uttering once more that terrible temptation. Surely, I thought, the dread enemy of mankind must be just such another as Dr. Nikola.

When the sun had disappeared below the sea line, the colour of the ocean had changed from all the dazzling tints of the king-opal to a sombre coal-black hue, and myriads of stars were beginning to make their appearance in the sky, I turned my boat's head, and pulled towards the shore again. A great melancholy had settled upon me, a vague sense of some impending catastrophe, of which, try how I would, I found I could not rid myself.

On reaching the plateau, I made my way to the cave, and looked in. I discovered Miss Maybourne kneeling beside the child on the grass. As soon as she saw me she rose and led me out into the open.

"Mr. Wrexford," she said, "the end is quite close now, I feel sure. The poor little thing is growing weaker every moment. Oh, it is too terrible to think that she must die because we have not the means to save her."

I did my best to comfort her, but it was some time before I achieved any sort of success. When she had in a measure recovered her composure, I accompanied her back to the cave and examined the little sufferer for myself. Alas! one glance

showed me how very close the end was. Already the child's face and hands were cold and clammy, her respiration was gradually becoming more and more difficult. She was still unconscious, and once I almost thought she was dead.

All through that dreadful night she lingered on. Miss Maybourne remained with her until close upon midnight, when I relieved her. Shortly before sunrise I went to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The stars were almost gone from the sky, and the world was very still. When I returned, I thought the child had suddenly grown strangely quiet, and knelt down to examine her. The first grey shafts of dawn showed me that at last the end had come. Death had claimed his victim. Henceforth we need feel no more concern for poor little Esther--her sufferings were over. She had gone to join her mother and the little ones who had lost their lives two days before. Having convinced myself that what I imagined was correct, I reverently closed the little eyes and crossed the frail hands upon her breast, and then went out into the fresh air. The sun was in the act of making his appearance above the peak, and all our little world was bathed in his glory. I looked across to the place between the rocks where I usually slept, and saw Miss Maybourne rising from her rest. My presence outside the cave must have told her my news, for she came swiftly across to where I stood.

"It is all over," she said, very quietly. "I can see by your face that the end has come."

I nodded. For the life of me, I could not have spoken just then. The sight of that agonised face before me and the thought of the dead child lying in the cave behind me deprived me of speech entirely. Miss Maybourne noticed my condition, and simply said, "Take me to her." I did as she commanded, and together we went back to the chamber of death. When we reached it, my companion stood for a few moments looking at the peaceful little figure on the couch of grass, and then knelt down beside it. I followed her example. Then, holding my hand in hers, she prayed for the child from whose body the soul had just departed; then for ourselves still left upon the island. When she had finished, we rose, and, after a final glance at our dead companion, went out into the open air again.

By this time I had got so much into the habit of searching the sea for ships that I did it almost unconsciously. As I passed the cave I glanced out across the waste of water. Then I stood stock still, hardly able to believe the evidence of my eyes. There, fast rising above the horizon, were the sails of a full-rigged ship. Miss Maybourne saw them as soon as I did, and together we stood staring at the vessel with all our eyes. My companion was the first to speak.

"Do you think she will come near enough to see us," she cried, in a voice I hardly recognized, so agitated was it.

"She must be made to see us," I answered, fiercely. "Come what may, she must not pass us."

"What are you going to do? How are you going to prevent it? Tell me, and let me help you if I can."

A notion had seized me, and I determined to put it into practice without an instant's delay.

"Let us collect all the wood we can find and then make a large bonfire. When that has been done, we must launch the boat and pull out to intercept her. If she sees the flare she will make her way here, and if she does not, we may be able to catch her before she gets out of our reach. Thus in either case we shall be saved."

Without another word we set to work collecting wood. By the time the hull of the vessel was above the horizon we had accumulated a sufficient quantity to make a large beacon. We did not set fire to it at once, however, for the reason that I had no desire to waste my smoke before those on board the ship would be able to distinguish it from the light clouds hovering about the peaks above. But before we could dream of leaving the island there were two other matters to be attended to. The first was to fill up the mouth of the cave with stones, for there was no time to dig a grave, and so convert it into a rough sepulchre; the second was to cook and eat our breakfast. It was certain we should require all our strength for the undertaking, and to attempt such a long row on an empty stomach would, I knew, be worse than madness. These things I explained to Miss Maybourne, who willingly volunteered to officiate as cook while I set about the work first mentioned. In something less than a quarter of an hour I had rolled several large rocks into the mouth of the cave, and upon these had placed others until the entrance was effectually barricaded. By the time this work was completed it was necessary to light the bonfire. This I did, setting fire to the dry grass at the bottom with a log from the blaze at which Miss Maybourne had just been cooking. In a few minutes we had a flare the flames of which could not have been less than twenty feet in height.

We ate our breakfast with our eyes fixed continually upon the advancing ship. So far she seemed to be heading directly for the island, but my fear was that she might change her course without discovering our beacon, and in that case be out of range before we could attract her attention. Our meal finished therefore, I led Miss Maybourne down the hill to the beach, and then between us we pushed the lifeboat into the water. My intention was to row out a few miles and endeavour to get

into such a position that whatever course the vessel steered she could not help but see us.

As soon as we had pushed off from the shore I turned the boat's head, and, taking up the oars, set to work to pull out to sea. It was not altogether an easy task, for the boat was a heavy one and the morning was strangely warm. The sky overhead was innocent of cloud, but away to the west it presented a hazy appearance; the look of which I did not altogether like. However, I stuck to my work, all the time keeping my eyes fixed on the rapidly advancing ship. She presented a fine appearance, and it was evident she was a vessel of about three thousand tons. I hoped she would turn out to belong to our own nationality, though under the circumstances any other would prove equally acceptable. At present she was distant from us about six miles, and as she was still heading directly for the island I began to feel certain she had observed our signal. For this reason I pointed my boat's head straight for her and continued to pull with all the strength I possessed. Suddenly Miss Maybourne uttered a little cry, and seeing her staring in a new direction I turned in my seat to discover what had occasioned it.

"She is leaving us," cried my companion, in agonized tones, pointing to the vessel we had been attempting to intercept. "Look, look, Mr. Wrexford, she is leaving us!"

There was no need for her to bid me look, I was watching the ship with all my eyes. Heaven alone knows how supreme was the agony of that moment. She had gone about, and for this reason it was plain that those on board had not seen our signal. Now, unless I could manage to attract her attention, it would be most unlikely that she would see us. In that case we might die upon the island without a chance of escape. At any cost we must intercept her. I accordingly resumed my seat again and began to pull wildly after her. Fortunately the breeze was light and the sea smooth, otherwise *I* should have made no headway at all. But when all was said and done, with both wind and tide in my favour, it was but little that I could accomplish. The boat, as I have already said, was a large and heavy one, and my strength was perhaps a little undermined by all I had gone through in the last two or three days. But, knowing what depended on it, *I* toiled at the oars like a galley slave, while Miss Maybourne kept her eyes fixed upon the retreating ship. At the end of an hour I was obliged to give up the race as hopeless. My strength was quite exhausted, and our hoped-for saviour was just showing hull down upon the horizon. Realizing this I dropped my head on to my hands like the coward I was and resigned myself to my despair. For the moment I think I must have forgotten that I was a man, I remembered only the fact that a chance had been given us of escaping from our prison, and that just as we were about to grasp it, it was snatched away again. Our fate seemed too cruel to be endured by mortal man.

"Courage, friend, courage," said Miss Maybourne, as she noticed my condition. "Bitter as our disappointment has been we have not done with hope yet. Because that vessel did not chance to rescue us it does not follow that another may not do so. Had we not better be getting back to the island? It is no use our remaining here now that the ship is out of sight."

I saw the wisdom contained in her remark, and accordingly pulled myself together and set to work to turn the boat's head in the direction we had come. But when we had *gone about*, my dismay may be imagined at discovering that a thick fog had obscured the island, and was fast bearing down upon us. Those on board the vessel we had been chasing must have seen it approaching, and have thought it advisable to give the island and its treacherous surroundings as wide a berth as possible.

"Can you see the land at all, Mr. Wrexford?" asked Miss Maybourne, who had herself been staring in the direction in which our bows were pointing.

"I must confess I can see nothing of it," I answered. "But if we continue in this direction and keep our ears open for the sound of the surf, there can be no doubt as to our being able to make our way back to the bay."

"How thick the fog is," she continued, "and how quickly it has come up! It makes me feel more nervous than even the thought of that ship forsaking us."

I stared at her in complete surprise. To think of Miss Maybourne, whom I had always found so cool and collected in moments of danger, talking of feeling nervous! I rallied her on the subject as I pulled along, and in a few moments she had forgotten her fear.

While I pulled along I tried to figure out what distance we could be from the island. When we discovered that the vessel had turned her back on us I had been rowing for something like half an hour.

At the rate we had been travelling that would have carried us about a couple of miles from the shore. After we had noticed the change in her course we had probably pulled another four at most. That being so, we should now be between

five and six miles from land--two hours' hard work in my present condition. To add to the unpleasantness of our position, the fog by this time had completely enveloped us, and to enable you to judge how dense it was I may say that I could only just distinguish my companion sitting in the stern of the boat. Still, however, I pulled on, pausing every now and again to listen for the noise of the surf breaking on the shore.

The silence was intense; the only sound we could hear was the tinkling of the water as it dripped off the ends of the oars. There was something indescribably awful about the utter absence of noise. It was like the peace which precedes some great calamity. It stretched the nerves to breaking pitch. Indeed, once when I allowed myself to think what our fate would be if by any chance we should miss the island, I had such a shock as almost deprived me of my power of thinking for some minutes.

For at least an hour and a half I pulled on, keeping her head as nearly as possible in the same direction, and expecting every moment to hear the roar of the breakers ahead. The fog still remained as thick as ever, and each time I paused in my work to listen the same dead silence greeted me as before. Once more I turned to my work, and pulled on without stopping for another quarter of an hour. Still no sound of the kind we hoped to hear came to us. The island seemed as difficult to find in that fog as the proverbial needle in the bundle of hay.

The agony of mind I suffered was enough to turn a man's brain. If only the fog would lift and let us have a glimpse of where we were, it would have been a different matter, but no such luck. It continued as thick as ever, wreathing and circling about us like the smoke from the infernal regions. At last I drew in my oars and arranged them by my side. Under the circumstances it was no use wasting what remained of my strength by useless exertion.

From that time forward--that is to say for at least six hours--we drifted on and on, the fog remaining as dense as when we had first encountered it. Throughout that time we kept our ears continually strained for a sound that might guide us, but always without success. By this time it must have been considerably past three in the afternoon, and for all we knew to the contrary we might still be miles and miles out of our reckoning. All through this agonizing period, however, Miss Maybourne did not once complain, but bore herself with a quiet bravery that would have shamed the veriest coward into at least an affectation of courage. How bitterly I now reproached myself for having left the island to pursue that vessel I must leave you to imagine. But for that suicidal act of folly we might now be on dry land, if not perhaps as luxuriously housed as we should have liked, at least safer than we were now. The responsibility for that act of madness rested entirely upon my shoulders, and the burden of that knowledge was my continual punishment.

At last I was roused from my bitter thoughts by my companion exclaiming that she thought the fog was lifting a little in one particular quarter. I looked in the direction indicated and had to admit that the atmosphere certainly seemed to be clearer there than elsewhere. Still, however, there was no noise of breakers to be heard.

The light in the quarter pointed out by my companion was destined to be the signal for the fog's departure, and in less than a quarter of an hour, starting from the time of our first observing it, the whole expanse of sea, from horizon to horizon, stood revealed to us. We sprang to our feet almost simultaneously, and searched the ocean for the island. But to our horror it was not to be seen. *We were alone on the open sea without either water or food, any real knowledge of where we were, or without being able to tell from which quarter we might expect assistance to come.* A more dreadful situation could scarcely be imagined, and when I considered the sex and weakness of my companion, and reflected what such a fate would mean for her, I could have cursed myself for the stupidity which had brought it all about.

For some moments after we had made our terrible discovery, neither of us spoke. Then our glances met and we read our terror in each other's eyes.

"What are we to do? What can we do?" cried Miss Maybourne, running her eyes round the horizon and then meeting my gaze again.

I shook my head and tried to think before I answered her.

"For the moment I am as powerless as yourself to say," I replied. "Even if we could fix the direction, goodness only knows how far we are from the island. We may be only distant ten miles or so, or we may be twenty. It must be nearly four o'clock by this time, and in another four hours at most darkness will be falling; under cover of the night we may miss it again. On the other hand we cannot exist here without food or water. Oh, Miss Maybourne, to what straits have I brought you through my stupidity. If we had stayed on the island instead of putting off on this fool's chase you would be safe now."

"You must not blame yourself, Mr. Wrexford," she answered. "Indeed you must not! It is not just, for I was quite as

anxious as yourself to try and intercept the vessel. That we did not succeed is not our fault, and in any case I will not let you reproach yourself.”

“Alas! I cannot help it,” I replied. “And your generosity only makes me do so the more.”

“In that case I shall cease to be generous,” she said. “We will see how that plan works. Come, come, my friend, let us look our situation in the face and see what is best to be done. Believe me, I have no fear. God will protect us in the future as He has done in the past.”

I looked at the noble girl as she said this, and took heart from the smile upon her face. If she could be so brave, surely I, who called myself a man, must not prove myself a coward. I pulled myself together and prepared to discuss the question as she desired. But it was the knowledge of our utter helplessness that discounted every hope. We had no food, we had no water. True, we might pull on; but if we did, in which direction should we proceed? To go east would be to find ourselves, if we lived so long--the chances against which were a thousand to one--on the most unhealthy part of the long coast line of Africa. To pull west would only be to get further out into mid-ocean, where, if we were not picked up within forty-eight hours, assistance would no longer be of any use to us. The Canary Islands, I knew, lay somewhere, say a hundred miles, to the southward, but we could not pull that distance without food or water, and even if we had a favourable breeze, we had no sail to take advantage of it. To make matters worse, the fishing line and hook I had manufactured for myself out of my scarf-pin, had been left on the island. Surely any man or woman might be excused for feeling melancholy under the pressure of such overwhelming misfortunes.

While we were thus considering our position the sun was sinking lower and lower to his rest, and would soon be below the horizon altogether. The sea was still as calm as a mill-pond, not a breath of air disturbed its placid surface. We sat just as we had done all day: Miss Maybourne in the stern, myself amidships. The oars lay on either side of me, useless as the rudder, the yoke lines had scarcely been touched since the ship had turned her back on us. When I look back on that awful time now, every detail of the boat, from the rowlocks to the grating on the bottom, seems impressed on my memory with a faithfulness that is almost a pain. I can see Miss Maybourne sitting motionless in the stern, her elbows on her knees and her face buried in her hands.

At last to rouse her and take her out of herself, I began to talk. What I said I cannot recollect, nor can I even recall the subject of my conversation. I know, however, that I continued to talk and insisted upon her answering me. In this way we passed the time until darkness fell and the stars came out. For the past hour I had been suffering agonies of thirst, and I knew, instinctively, that my companion must be doing the same. I followed her example and dabbled my hands in the water alongside. The coolness, however, while proving infinitely refreshing to my parched skin, only helped to intensify my desire for something to drink. I searched the heavens in the hope of discovering a cloud that might bring us rain, but without success.

“Courage,” said Miss Maybourne again, as she noticed me drop my head on to my hands in my despair. “As I said just now, we are in God’s hands; and I feel certain we shall be saved at last.”

As if in mockery of her faith I noticed that her voice had lost its usually clear ring, and that it was lower than I had ever hitherto heard it. But there was a note of conviction in it that showed me how firm her belief was. For my own part I must confess that I had long since given up all hope. In the face of so many calamitous circumstances it seemed impossible that we could be saved. My obvious duty there was to endeavour by every means in my power to make death as easy as possible for the woman I loved.

In the same tedious fashion hour after hour went by and still we remained as we were, floating idly upon the bosom of the deep. Twice I tried to persuade Miss Maybourne to lie down at the bottom of the boat and attempt to obtain some sleep, but she would not hear of such a thing. For myself I could not have closed my eyes for five minutes, even if by doing so I could have saved my life. Every faculty was strained to breaking pitch, and I was continually watching and listening for something, though what I expected to see or hear I could not have told if I had been asked. I pray to God that I may never again be called upon to spend such another absolutely despairing night.



CHAPTER 42. WE'RE SAVED!

THE calm with which we had so far been favoured was not, however, destined to be as permanent as we imagined, for towards the middle of the night the wind got up, and the sea, from being as smooth as glass, became more boisterous than I altogether liked. Miss Maybourne, who now seemed to be sunk into the lethargy from which she had roused me, lifted her head from her hands, and at intervals glanced over her shoulder apprehensively at the advancing waves. One thing was very evident: it would never do to let our boat drift broadside on to the seas, so I got out the oars again, and to distract my companion's thoughts, invited her to take the helm. She did as I requested, but without any sign of the eagerness she had hitherto displayed. Then, for something like an hour, we struggled on in this crab-like fashion. It was Herculean labour, and every minute found my strength becoming more and more exhausted. The power of the wind was momentarily increasing, and with it the waves were assuming more threatening proportions. To say that I did not like the look of affairs would be to put my feelings very mildly. To tell the truth, I was too worn out to think of anything, save what our fate would be if by any chance we should be on the edge of an hurricane. However, I knew it would not do to meet trouble half-way, so by sheer force of will I rivetted my attention upon the boat, and in thus endeavouring to avert the evil of the present, found sufficient occupation to prevent me from cross-questioning the future.

Suddenly Miss Maybourne, who, as I have said, had for some time been sitting in a constrained attitude in the stern, sprang to her feet with a choking cry.

"Mr. Wrexford," she said, in a voice that at any other time I should not have recognised as hers, "I must have something to drink or I shall go mad."

Fearing she might fall overboard in her excitement, I leapt up, seized her in my arms, and dragged her down to her seat again. Had I not done so, I cannot say what might not have happened.

"Let me go," she moaned. "Oh, for Heaven's sake, let me go! You don't know what agony I am suffering."

I could very well guess, for I had my own feelings to guide me. But it was my duty to try and cheer her at any cost, and upon this work I concentrated all my energies, at the same time keeping the boat's head in such a position that the racing seas should not overwhelm her--no light work, I can assure you. When at last I *did* succeed in calming her, she sat staring straight ahead of her like a woman turned to stone. It was pitiful to see a woman, who had hitherto been so brave, brought so low. I put my arm round her waist the better to hold her, and, as I did so, watched the black seas, with their tips of snowy foam, come hissing towards us. Overhead the stars shone brightly, and still not a vestige of a cloud was to be seen. It seemed like doubting Providence to believe that, after all the dangers from which we had been preserved since we had left England, we were destined to die of starvation in an open boat in mid-Atlantic. And yet how like it it looked.

After that one outburst of despair Miss Maybourne gave no more trouble, and when she had been sitting motionless beside me for an hour or thereabouts fell fast asleep, her head resting on my arm. Weak and suffering as I was, I was not so far gone as to be unable to feel a thrill of delight at this close contact with the woman I loved. What would I not have given to have been able to take her in my arms and have comforted her properly!--to have told her of my love, and, in the event of her returning it, to have faced King Death side by side as lovers. With her hand in mine Death would not surely be so very terrible. However, such a thing could not be thought of. I was a criminal, a murderer flying from justice; and it would have been an act of the basest sacrilege on my part to have spoken a word to her of the affection which by this time had come to be part and parcel of my life. For this reason I had to crush it and keep it down; and, if by any chance we should be rescued, I would have to leave her and go out to hide myself in the world without allowing her ever to suspect the thoughts I had had in my mind concerning her. God knows, in this alone I had suffered punishment enough for the sin I had unintentionally committed.

At last the eastern stars began to lose something of their brilliance, and within a short period of my noticing this change, the wind, which had been sensibly moderating for some time past, dropped to a mere zephyr, and then died away completely. With its departure the violence of the waves subsided, and the ocean was soon, if not so smooth as on the previous day, at least sufficiently so to prevent our feeling any further anxiety on the score of the boat's safety.

One by one the stars died out of the sky, and a faint grey light, almost dove-coloured in its softness, took their place. In this light our boat looked double her real size, but such a lonely speck upon that waste of water that it would have made the

heart of the boldest man sink into his shoes with fear. From the above-mentioned hue the colour quickly turned to the palest turquoise, and again to the softest pink. From pink it grew into a kaleidoscope of changing tints until the sun rose like a ball of gold above the sea-line--and day was born to us. In the whole course of my experience I never remember to have seen a more glorious sunrise. How different was it in its joyous lightness and freshness to the figures presented by the two miserable occupants of that lonely boat!

At last Miss Maybourne opened her eyes, and, having glanced round her, sat up. My arm, when she did so, was so cramped and stiff that for a moment I could scarcely bear to move it. She noticed this, and tried to express her regret, but her tongue refused to obey her commands. Seeing this, with an inarticulate sound she dropped her head on to her hands once more. To restore some animation into my cramped limbs, I rose and endeavoured to make my way to the bows of the boat. But, to my dismay, I discovered that I was as weak as a month-old child. My legs refused to support the weight of my body, and with a groan I sank down on the thwart where I had previously been rowing.

For upwards of half an hour we remained as we were, without speaking. Then I suddenly chanced to look along the sea-line to the westward. The atmosphere was so clear that the horizon stood out like a pencilled line. I looked, rubbed my eyes, and looked again. Could I be dreaming, or was it a delusion conjured up by an overtaxed brain. I shut my eyes for a moment, then opened them, and looked again. No, there could be no mistake about it this time. *A ship was in sight, and heading directly for us!* Oh, the excitement of that moment, the delirious joy, the wild, almost cruel, hope that seized me! But, mad with longing though I was, I had still sufficient presence of mind left to say nothing about my discovery to Miss Maybourne until I was sure of my facts. She was sitting with her back towards it, and therefore could not see it. So, while there was any chance of the vessel leaving us, I was not going to excite her hopes, only to have them blighted again. There would be plenty of time to tell her when she was close enough to see us.

For what seemed an eternity I kept my eyes fixed upon the advancing vessel, watching her rise higher and higher above the waves. She was a large steamer, almost twice the size of the ill-fated *Fiji Princess*. A long trail of smoke issued from her funnels; and at last, so close did she come, I could distinguish the water frothing at her bows with the naked eye. When she was not more than three miles distant, I sprang to my feet.

"We're saved, Miss Maybourne!" I cried frantically, finding my voice and strength as suddenly as I had lost them. "We're saved! Oh, thank God, thank God!"

She turned her head as I spoke, and looked steadily in the direction I pointed for nearly a minute. Then, with a little sigh, she fell upon the gunwale in a dead faint. I sprang to her assistance, and, kneeling at her feet, chafed her hands and called her by name, and implored her to speak to me. But in spite of my exertions, she did not open her eyes. When a quarter of an hour had elapsed, and she was still insensible, I began to wonder what I should do. To remain attending to her might mean that we should miss our deliverer. In that case we should both die. At any cost, and now more than ever, I knew I must attract the steamer's attention. She was not more than a mile behind us by this time, and, if I could only make her see us, she would be alongside in a few minutes. For this reason I tore off my coat, and, attaching it to an oar, began to wave it frantically above my head. Next moment a long whistle came across the waves to me. It was a signal that our boat had been observed, and never did a sound seem more musical to a human ear. On hearing it, I stood up again, and, shading my eyes with my hands, watched her approach, my heart beating like a piston-rod. Closer and closer she came, until I could easily read the name, *King of Carthage*, upon her bows. When she was less than a hundred yards distant, an officer on the bridge came to the railings, and hailed us.

"Boat, ahoy!" he cried. "Do you think you can manage to pull alongside? or shall we send assistance to you?"

In reply--for I could not trust my voice to speak--I got out my oars, and began to row towards her. Short as was the distance, it took me some time to accomplish it. Seeing this, the same officer again hailed me, and bade me make fast the line that was about to be thrown to me. The words were hardly out of his mouth before the line in question came whistling about my ears. I seized it as a drowning man is said to clutch at a straw, and, clambering forward, secured it to the ring in the bows. When that was done, I heard an order given, and willing hands pulled us quickly alongside.

By the time we reached it the gangway had been lowered, and a couple of men were standing at the foot of it ready to receive us. I remember leaning over to fend her off, and I also have a good recollection of seeing one of the men--the ship's doctor I afterwards discovered him to be--step into the boat.

"Can you walk up the steps yourself, or would you like to be carried?" he asked, as I sank down on the thwart again.

"Carry the lady," I answered huskily; "I can manage to get up myself. Take her quickly, or she will die."

I saw him pick Miss Maybourne up, and, assisted by the quartermaster who had accompanied him, carry her up the ladder. I attempted to follow, only to discover how weak I really was. By the exercise of sheer will, however, I managed to scramble up, holding on to the rail, and so gained the deck. Even after all this lapse of time I can distinctly see the crowd of eager faces pressed round the top of the ladder to catch a glimpse of us, and I can hear again the murmurs of sympathy that went up as we made our appearance. After that all seems a blank, and I can only believe what I am told--namely, that I looked round me in a dazed sort of fashion, and then fell in a dead faint upon the deck.

When I recovered consciousness again, I had to think for a moment before I could understand what had happened. I found myself in a handsomely-furnished cabin that I had never seen before. For an instant I imagined myself back again on the ill-fated *Fiji Princess*. Then a tall, red-bearded man--the same who had carried Miss Maybourne up from the boat--entered, and came towards me. Through the door, which he had left open, I could see the awning-covered promenade-deck outside. As soon as I saw him I tried to sit up on the velvet-cushioned locker upon which I had been placed, but he bade me be content to lie still for a little while.

"You will be far better where you are," he said. "What you want is rest and quiet. Take a few sips of this, and then lie down again and try to get to sleep. You have some arrears to make up in that line, or I'm mistaken."

He handed me a glass from the tray above my couch, and held it for me while I drank. When I had finished I laid myself down again, and, instead of obeying him, began to question him as to where I was. But once more I was forestalled, this time by the entrance of a steward carrying a bowl of broth on a tray.

"You see we're determined, one way or another, to close your mouth," he said, with a laugh. "But this stuff is too hot for you at present. We'll put it down here to cool, and in the meantime I'll answer not more than half-a-dozen questions. Fire away, if you feel inclined."

I took him at his word, and put the one question of all others I was longing to have answered.

"How is the lady who was rescued with me?"

"Doing as well as can be expected, poor soul," he replied. "She's being well looked after, so you need not be anxious about her. You must have had a terrible time in that boat, to judge from the effects produced. Now, what is the next question?"

"I want to know what ship this is, and how far we were from the Salvages when you picked us up?"

"This vessel is *The King of Carthage*--Captain Blockman in command. I'm afraid I can't answer your last question offhand, for the reason that, being the doctor, I have nothing to do with the navigation of the ship; but I'll soon find out for you."

He left the cabin, and went to the foot of the ladder that led to the bridge. I heard him call the officer of the watch, and say something to him. Presently he returned.

"The Salvages lie about seventy miles due nor'-nor'-east of our present position," he said.

"Nor'-nor'-east?" I cried. "Then I was even further out in my calculations than I expected."

"Why do you ask about the Salvages?"

"Because it was on a rock off those islands that our ship, the *Fiji Princess*, was lost. We put off from the island to try and catch a sailing vessel that came in sight yesterday morning. A dense fog came on, however, and during the time it lasted we lost both the ship we went out to stop and also our island. Ever since then we have been drifting without food or water."

"You have indeed had a terrible experience. But you've a splendid constitution, and you'll soon get over the effects of it. And now tell me, were no others saved from the wreck?"

"As far as we could tell, with the exception of our three selves, not a single soul."

"You say 'three selves,' but we only rescued the lady and yourself. What, then, became of the third?"

"The third was a child about eight years old. The poor little thing must have been hurt internally when we were sucked under by the sinking ship, and her condition was probably not improved by the long exposure we had to endure on the bottom of the boat from which you rescued us. She scarcely recovered consciousness, and died on the island a short time before we left it in our attempt to catch the vessel I spoke of just now."

"I never heard a sadder case," said the doctor. "You are indeed to be pitied. I wonder the lady, your companion, came through it alive. By the way, the skipper was asking me just now if I knew your names."

"The lady is Miss Maybourne, whose father is a well-known man at the Cape, I believe."

"Surely not Cornelius Maybourne, the mining man?"

"Yes, she is his daughter. He will be in a terrible state when the *Fiji Princess* is reported missing."

"I expect he will; but, fortunately, we shall be in Cape Town almost as soon as she would have been, and he will find that his daughter, thanks to your care, is safe and sound. Now I am not going to let you talk any more. First, take as much of this broth as you can manage, and then lie down and try to get to sleep again. As I said just now, I prophesy that in a few days you'll be up and about, feeling no ill-effects from your terrible adventure."

I obeyed him, and drank the broth. When I had done so I lay down again, and in a very short time was once more in the Land of Nod. When I opened my eyes again the cabin was almost dark. The doctor was still in attendance, and, as soon as he saw that I was awake, asked me if I would like to get up for a little while. I answered that I should be only too glad to do so; and when he had helped me to dress, I took possession of a chair on the promenade-deck outside. It was just dinner-time in the saloon, and by the orders of the captain, who came personally to enquire how I was, I was served with a meal on deck. Nothing could have exceeded the kindness and thoughtfulness of the officers and passengers. The latter, though anxious to hear our story from my own lips, refrained from bothering me with questions; and thinking quiet would conduce to my recovery, allowed me to have the use of that end of the deck unmolested. As soon as I could do so, I enquired once more after Miss Maybourne, and was relieved to hear that she was making most satisfactory progress towards recovery. After dinner the captain came up, and seating himself in a chair beside me, asked a few questions concerning the foundering of the *Fiji Princess*, which information, I presumed, he required for his log.

"You have placed Mr. Maybourne very deeply in your debt," he said, after a little further conversation; "and I don't doubt but there will be many who will envy your good fortune in having conferred so signal a service upon his daughter. By the way, you have not told us your own name."

My heart gave a great jump, and for the moment I seemed to feel myself blushing to the roots of my hair. After the great kindness I had already received from everyone on board the vessel, it seemed worse than ungrateful to deceive them. But I dared not tell the truth. For all I knew to the contrary, my name might have been proclaimed everywhere in England before they left.

"My name is Wrexford," I said, feeling about as guilty as a man could well do.

"Any relation to the Wrexfords of Shrewsbury?" asked the captain with mild curiosity.

"Not that I'm aware of," I answered. "I have been living out of England for many years, and have no knowledge of my relations."

"It's not a common name," continued the skipper; "that is why I ask. Sir George Wrexford is one of our directors, and a splendid fellow. I thought it was just possible that you might be some connection of his. Now, if you will excuse me, I'll be off. Take my advice and turn in early. I'm sorry to say we're carrying our full complement of passengers, so that I cannot give you a proper berth; but I've ordered a bed to be made up for you in my chart-room, where you have been all day to-day. If you can manage to make yourself comfortable there it is quite at your service."

"It is very kind of you to put yourself to so much inconvenience," I answered. "I fear by the time we reach Cape Town I shall have caused you a considerable amount of trouble."

"Not at all! Not at all!" the hospitable skipper replied, as he rose to go. "I'm only too glad to have picked you up. It's our duty to do what we can for each other, for we none of us know when we may be placed in a similar plight ourselves."

After he left me, I was not long in following the good advice he had given me; and when I had once reached my couch, fell into a dreamless sleep, from which I did not wake until after eight o'clock next morning. Indeed, I don't know that I should have waked even then, had I not been disturbed by the noise made by someone entering the cabin. It proved to be the doctor.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked, when he had felt my pulse.

"Ever so much better," I replied. "In fact, I think I'm quite myself again. How is Miss Maybourne?"

"Still progressing satisfactorily," he answered. "She bids me give you her kind regards. She has been most constant in

her enquiries after your welfare.”

I don’t know whether my face had revealed my secret, or whether it was only supposition on his part, but he looked at me pretty hard for a moment, and then laughed outright.

“You may not know it,” he said, “but when all’s said and done, you’re a jolly lucky fellow.”

I sighed, and hesitated a moment before I replied.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” I said. “Luck and I have never been companions. I doubt if there is a man in this world whose career has been more devoid of good fortune than mine. As a boy, I was unlucky in everything I undertook. If I played cricket, I was always either bowled for a duck’s egg, or run out just as I was beginning to score. If there was an accident in the football field, when I was playing, I was invariably the sufferer. I left Oxford under a cloud, because I could not explain something that I knew to be a mistake on the part of the authorities. I quarrelled with my family on the same misunderstanding. I was once on the verge of becoming a millionaire, but illness prevented my taking advantage of my opportunity; and while I was thus delayed another man stepped in and forestalled me. I had a legacy, but it brought me nothing but ill-luck, and has finally driven me out of England!”

“And since then the tide of ill-fortune has turned,” he said. “A beautiful and wealthy girl falls overboard—you dive in, and rescue her. I have heard about that, you see. The ship you are travelling by goes to the bottom—you save your own and the same girl’s life. Then, as if that is not enough, you try your luck a third time; and, just as a terrible fate seems to be going to settle you for good and all, we heave in sight and rescue you. Now you have Miss Maybourne’s gratitude, which would strike most men as a more than desirable possession, and at the same time you will have her father’s.”

“And, by the peculiar irony of fate, both come to me when I am quite powerless to take advantage of them.”

“Come, come, you mustn’t let yourself down like this. You know very well what the end of it all will be, if you spend your life believing yourself to be a marked man.”

“You mean that I shall lose my reason? No, no! you needn’t be afraid of that. I come of a hard-headed race that has not been in the habit of stocking asylums.”

“I am glad of that. Now what do you say to getting up? I’ll have your breakfast sent to you in here, and after you’ve eaten it, I’ll introduce you to some of the passengers. On the whole, they are a nice lot, and very much interested in my two patients.”

I thanked him, and, to show how very much better I felt, sprang out of bed and began to dress. True to his promise, my breakfast was brought to me by a steward, and I partook of it on the chart-room table. Just as I finished the doctor reappeared, and, after a little conversation, we left the cabin and proceeded out on to the deck together. Here we found the majority of the passengers promenading, or seated in their chairs. Among them I noticed two clergymen, two or three elderly gentlemen of the colonial merchant type, a couple of dapper young fellows whom I set down in my own mind as belonging to the military profession, the usual number of elderly ladies, half a dozen younger ones, of more or less fascinating appearances, and the same number of children. As soon as they saw me several of those seated rose and came to meet us. The doctor performed the necessary introductions, and in a few minutes I found myself seated in a comfortable deck-chair receiving innumerable congratulations on my recovery. Strange to say, I did not dislike their sympathy as much as I had imagined I should do. There was something so spontaneous and unaffected about it that I would have defied even the most sensitive to take offence. To my astonishment, I discovered that no less than three were personal friends of Miss Maybourne’s, though all confessed to having failed in recognising her when the boat came alongside. For the greater part of the morning I remained chatting in my chair, and by mid-day felt so much stronger that, on the doctor’s suggestion, I ventured to accompany him down to the saloon for lunch. The *King of Carthage* was a finer vessel in every way than the ill-fated *Fiji Princess*. Her saloon was situated amidships, and could have contained the other twice over comfortably. The appointments generally were on a scale of great magnificence; and, from what I saw at lunch, the living was on a scale to correspond. I sat at a small table presided over by the doctor, and situated near the foot of the companion ladder. In the pauses of the meal I looked round at the fine paintings let into the panels between the ports, at the thick carpet upon the floor, the glass dome overhead, and then at the alley-ways leading to the cabins at either end. In which direction did Miss Maybourne’s cabin lie, I wondered. The doctor must have guessed what was passing in my mind, for he nodded his head towards the after-alley on the starboard side, and from that time forward I found my eyes continually reverting to it.

Luncheon over, I returned to the promenade-deck, and, after a smoke--the first in which I had indulged since we left

the island--acted on the doctor's advice, and went to my cabin to lie down for an hour or so.

When I returned to the deck, afternoon tea was going forward, and a chair having been found for me, I was invited to take a cup. While I was drinking it, the skipper put in an appearance. He waited until I had finished, and then said he would like to show me something if I would accompany him along the deck to his private cabin. When we reached it, he opened the door and invited me to enter. I did so, and, as I crossed the threshold, gave a little start of surprise, for Miss Maybourne was there, lying upon the locker.

"Why, Miss Maybourne!" I cried, in complete astonishment, "this is a pleasant surprise. I had no idea you were about again. I hope you are feeling stronger."

"Much stronger," she answered. "I expect I shall soon be quite myself again, now that I have once made a start. Mr. Wrexford, I asked Captain Blockman to let me see you in here for the first time, in order that I might have an opportunity of expressing my gratitude to you before we face the passengers. You cannot imagine how grateful I am to you for all you have done for me since that awful night when the *Fiji Princess* went down. How can I ever repay you for it?"

"By becoming yourself again as quickly as possible," I answered; "I ask no better payment."

I thought she looked at me in rather a strange way as I said this; but it was not until some time later that I knew the reason of it. At the time I would have given worlds to have spoken the thoughts that were in my mind; but that being impossible, I had to hold my tongue, though my heart should break under the strain. We were both silent for a little while, and then Miss Maybourne took my hand, and I could see that she was steeling herself to ask me some question, and was not quite certain what answer she would receive to it.

"Mr. Wrexford," she began, and there was a little falter in her voice as she spoke, "you told me on board the *Fiji Princess* that you were going to South Africa to try and obtain employment. You must forgive my saying anything about it, but I also gathered from what you told me that you would arrive there without influence of any sort. Now, I want you to promise me that you will let papa help you. I'm sure he will be only too grateful for the chance. It would be a kindness to him, for he will remember that, but for you, he would never have seen me again."

"I did not do it for the sake of reward, Miss Maybourne," I answered, with an outburst of foolish pride that was not very becoming to me.

"Who knows that better than I?" she replied, her face flushing at the thought that she had offended me. "But you must not be angry with me. It would be kind of you to let me show my gratitude in some way. Papa would be so glad to give you letters of introduction, or to introduce you personally to people of influence, and then there is nothing you might not be able to do. You will let him help you, won't you?"

If she could only have known what she was asking of me! To be introduced to the prominent people of the colony was the very last thing in the world I wanted. My desire was to not only attract as little attention as might be, but also to get up country and beyond the reach of civilization as quickly as possible.

However, I was not going to make Miss Maybourne unhappy on the first day of her convalescence, so I promised to consider the matter, and to let her know my decision before we reached Cape Town. By this compromise I hoped to be able to hit upon some way out of the difficulty before then.

From that day forward the voyage was as pleasant as it would be possible for one to be. Delicate as was our position on board, we were not allowed for one moment to feel that we were not upon the same footing as those who had paid heavily for their accommodation. The officers and passengers vied with each other in showing us kindnesses, and, as may be imagined, we were not slow to express our gratitude.

Day after day slipped quickly by, and each one brought us nearer and nearer to our destination. As the distance lessened my old fears returned upon me. After all the attention I had received from our fellow-travellers, after Miss Maybourne's gracious behaviour towards me, it will be readily imagined how much I dreaded the chance of exposure. How much better, I asked myself, would it not be to drop quietly overboard while my secret was still undiscovered, than to stay on board and be proclaimed a murderer before them all?

On the evening prior to our reaching Cape Town I was leaning on the rails of the promenade deck, just below the bridge, when Miss Maybourne left a lady with whom she had been conversing, and came and stood beside me. The evening was cool, and for this reason she had thrown a lace mantilla, lent her by one of the passengers, over her head, and had draped it round her shapely neck. It gave her an infinitely charming appearance; indeed, in my eyes, she appeared the

most beautiful of all God's creatures--a being to be loved and longed for beyond all her sex.

"And so to-morrow, after all our adventures, we shall be in Cape Town," she said. "Have you thought of the promise you gave me a fortnight **ago**?"

"What promise was that?" I asked, though I knew full well to what she alluded.

"To let papa find you some employment. I *do* hope you will allow him to do so."

I looked at her as she stood beside me, one little hand resting on the rail and her beautiful eyes gazing across the starlit sea, and thought how hard it was to resist her. But at any cost I could not remain in Cape Town. Every hour I spent there would bring me into greater danger.

"I *have* been thinking it over as I promised," I said, "and I have come to the conclusion that it would not be wise for me to accept your offer. I have told you repeatedly, Miss Maybourne, that I am not like other men. God knows how heartily I repent my foolish past. But repentance, however sincere, will not take away the stain. I want to get away from civilization as far and as quickly as possible. For this reason immediately we arrive I shall start for the Transvaal, and once there shall endeavour to carve out a new name and a new life for myself. This time, Providence helping me, it shall be a life of honour."

"God grant you may succeed!" she said, but so softly that I could scarcely hear it.

"May I tell myself that I have your good wishes, Miss Maybourne?" I asked, with, I believe, a little tremor in my voice.

"Every good wish I have is yours," she replied. "I should be worse than ungrateful, after all you have done for me, if I did not take an interest in your future."

Then I did a thing for which it was long before I could forgive myself. Heaven alone knows what induced me to do it; but if my life had depended on it I could not have acted otherwise. I took her hand in mine and drew her a little closer to me.

"Agnes," I said, very softly, as she turned her beautiful face towards me, "to-morrow we shall be separated, perhaps never to meet again. After tonight it is possible, if not probable, that we shall not have another opportunity of being alone together. You don't know what your companionship has been to me. Before I met you, I was desperate. My life was not worth living; but you have changed it all--you have made me a better man. You have taught me to love you, and in that love I have found my belief in all that is good--even, I believe, a faith in God. Oh, Agnes, Agnes! I am not worthy to touch the ground you have walked on, but I love you as I shall never love woman again!"

She was trembling violently, but she did not speak. Her silence had the effect, however, of bringing me to myself, and it showed me my conduct in all its naked baseness.

"Forgive me," I whispered; "it was vile of me to have insulted you with this avowal. Forget--and forgive, if you can--that I ever spoke the words. Remember me only as a man, the most miserable in the whole world, who would count it heaven to be allowed to lay down his life for you or those you love. Oh, Agnes! is it possible that you can forgive me?"

This time she answered without hesitation.

"I have nothing to forgive," she said, looking up into my face with those proud, fearless eyes that seemed to hold all the truth in the world; "I am proud beyond measure to think you love me."

When I heard these precious words, I could have fallen at her feet and kissed the hem of her dress; but I dared not speak, lest I should forget myself in my joy, and say something for which I should never be able to atone. Agnes, however, was braver than I.

"Mr. Wrexford," she said, "you have told me that you love me, and now you are reproaching yourself for having done so. Is it because, as you say, you are poor? Do you think so badly of me as to imagine that that could make any difference to me?"

"I could not think so badly of you if I tried," I answered.

"You have said that you love me?"

"And I mean it. I love you as I believe man never loved woman before--certainly as I shall never love again."

Then, lowering her head so that I could not see her face, she whispered--

"Will it make you happier if I say that I love you?"

Her voice was soft as the breath of the evening rustling some tiny leaf, but it made my heart leap with a delight I had

never known before, and then sink deeper and deeper down with a greater shame.

“God forbid!” I cried, almost fiercely. “You must not love me. You shall not do so. I am not worthy even that you should think of me.”

“You are worthy of a great deal more,” she answered. “Oh, why will you so continually reproach yourself?”

“Because, Agnes, my conscience will not let me be silent,” I cried. “Because, Agnes, you do not know the shame of my life.”

“I will not let you say ‘shame,’” she replied. “Have I not grown to know you better than you know yourself?”

How little she knew of me! How little she guessed what I was! We were both silent again, and for nearly five minutes. I was the first to speak. And it took all the pluck of which I was master to say what was in my mind.

“Agnes,” I began, “this must be the end of such talk between us. God knows, if I were able in honour to do so, I would take your love, and hold you against the world. But, as things are, to do that would be to proclaim myself the most despicable villain in existence. You must not ask me why. I could not tell you. But some day, if by chance you should hear the world’s verdict, try to remember that, whatever I may have been, I did my best to behave like a man of honour to you.”

She did not answer, but dropped her head on to her hands and sobbed as if her heart would break. Then, regaining her composure a little, she stood up again and faced me. Holding out her hand, she said:

“You have told me that you love me. I have said that I love you. You say that we must part. Let it be so. You know best. May God have mercy on us both!”

I tried to say “Amen,” but my voice refused to serve me, and as I turned and looked across the sea I felt the hot salt tears rolling down my cheeks. By the time I recovered my self-possession she had left me and had gone below.



CHAPTER 43. SOUTH AFRICA.

EVEN o'clock next morning found us entering Table Bay, our eventful journey accomplished. Overhead towered the famous mountain from which the Bay derives its name, its top shrouded in its cloth. At its foot reposed the town with which my destiny seemed so vitally connected, and which I was approaching with so much trepidation. As I stood on the promenade deck and watched the land open out before me, my sensations would have formed a good problem for a student of character. With a perception rendered abnormally acute by my fear, I could discern the boat of the port authorities putting off to us long before I should, at any other time, have been able to see it. It had yet to be discovered whether or not it contained a police official in search of me. As I watched her dipping her nose into the seas, and then tossing the spray off from either bow, in her haste to get to us, she seemed to me to be like a bloodhound on my track. The closer she came the more violently my heart began to beat, until it was as much as I could do to breathe. If only I could be certain that she was conveying an officer to arrest me, I felt I might find pluck enough to drop overboard and so end the pursuit for good and all. But I did not know, and the doubt upon the point decided me to remain where I was and brave the upshot.

As I watched her, I heard a footstep upon the deck behind me. I turned my head to find that it was Miss Maybourne. She came up beside me, and having glanced ashore at the city nestling at the foot of the great mountain, and then at the launch coming out to meet us, turned to address me.

"Mr. Wrexford," she began, "I am going to ask you to do me a great favour, and I want you to promise me to grant it before I tell you what it is."

"I'm afraid I can hardly do that," I answered. "But if you will tell me what it is, I will promise to do it for you if it is in any way possible."

"It is this," she said: "I want you, in the event of my father not meeting me, to take me home. Oh don't say no, Mr. Wrexford, I want you so much to do it. Surely you will not deny me the last request I make to you?"

She looked so pleadingly into my face that, as usual, it required all my courage not to give way to her. But the risk was too great for me even to contemplate such a thing for a moment. My rescue of the daughter of Cornelius Maybourne, and my presence in Cape Town, would soon leak out, and then it would be only a matter of hours before I should be arrested. Whatever my own inclinations may have been, I felt there was nothing for it but for me to refuse.

"I am not my own master in this matter," I replied, with a bitterness which must have shown her how much in earnest I was. "It is impossible that I can remain so long in the place. There are the most vital reasons in the world against it. I can only ask you to believe that."

I saw large tears rise in her eyes, though she turned hurriedly away in the hope that I should not see them. To see her weep, however, was more than I could bear, and under the influence of her trouble my resolutions began to give way. After all, if I *was* destined to be arrested, I might just as well be taken at Mr. Maybourne's house as elsewhere--perhaps better. Besides, it was more than likely, in the event of no warrant having been issued, Mr. Maybourne, whose influence, I had been told, was enormous in the colony, might prove just the very friend of all others I wanted. At any rate, if I were not taken before the time came for going ashore, I would do as she wished. I told her this, and she immediately thanked me and went down below again.

Just as I announced my decision the launch came alongside, and a moment later her passengers were ascending the accommodation ladder, which had been lowered to receive them. They were three in number, and included--so I was told by a gentleman who stood beside me--the harbour master, the officer of health, and another individual, about whose identity my informant was not quite assured. I looked at the last-named with no little apprehension; my nervousness endowed him with all the attributes of a police official, and my mind's eye could almost discover the manacles reposing in his coat pocket. I trust I may never pass through such another agonizing few minutes as I experienced then. I saw the party step on to the spar deck, where they shook hands with the purser and the chief officer, and watched them as they ascended to the promenade deck and made their way towards the bridge. Here they were received by the skipper. I leaned against the rails, sick with fear and trembling in every limb, expecting every moment to feel a heavy hand upon my shoulder, and to hear a stern voice saying in my ear--"Gilbert Pennethorne, I arrest you on a charge of murder."

But minute after minute went by, and still no one came to speak the fatal words. The ship, which had been brought to a standstill to pick up the boat, had now got under weigh again, and we were approaching closer and closer to the docks. In less than half an hour I should know my fate.

As soon as we were safely installed in dock, and everyone was looking after his or her luggage, saying "good-bye" and preparing to go ashore, I began to look about me for Miss Maybourne. Having found her we went to the chart-room together to bid the captain "good-bye," and to thank him for the hospitality and kindness he had shown us. The doctor had next to be discovered, and when he had been assured of our gratitude, we made enquiries for Mr. Maybourne. It soon became evident that he was not on board, so, taking his daughter under my protection, we said our final farewells and went down the gangway. For the first time in my life I set foot on South African soil.

The Custom House once passed, and the authorities convinced that we had nothing to declare, I hailed a cab and invited Miss Maybourne to instruct the driver in which direction he was to proceed. Half an hour later we had left the city behind us, and were driving through the suburbs in the direction of Mr. Maybourne's residence. After following a pretty road for something like a mile, on either side of which I noticed a number of stately residences, we found ourselves confronted with a pair of large iron gates, behind which was a neat lodge. But for the difference in the vegetation, it might very well have been the entrance to an English park. Through the trees ahead I could distinguish, as we rolled along the well-kept drive, the chimneys of a noble residence; but I was quite unprepared for the picture which burst upon my view when we turned a corner and had the whole house before us. Unlike most South African dwellings, it was a building of three stories, surmounted by a tower. Broad verandahs ran round each floor, and the importance of the building was enhanced by the fact that it stood on a fine terrace, which again led down by a broad flight of steps to the flower gardens and orangery. A more delightful home could scarcely be imagined; and when I saw it, I ceased to wonder that Miss Maybourne had so often expressed a preference for South Africa as compared with England.

When the cab drew up at the front door I jumped out, and was about to help my companion to alight when I heard the front door open, and next moment a tall, fine-looking man, about sixty years of age, crossed the verandah and came down the steps. At first he regarded me with a stare of surprise, but before he could ask me my business, Miss Maybourne had descended from the vehicle and was in his arms. Not desiring to interrupt them in their greetings I strolled down the path. But I was not permitted to go far before I heard my name called. I turned, and went back to have my hand nearly shaken off by Mr. Maybourne.

"My daughter says you have saved her life," he cried. "I'll not ask questions now, but I thank you, sir--from the bottom of my heart I thank you. God knows you have done me a service the value of which no man can estimate."

The warmth of his manner was so much above what I had expected that it left me without power to reply.

"Come in, come in," he continued in a voice that fairly shook with emotion. "Oh, let us thank God for this happy day!"

He placed his arm round his daughter's waist, and drew her to him as if he would not let her move from his side again. I followed a few steps behind, and should have entered the house had I not been recalled by the cabman, who ventured to remind me that he had not yet been paid.

I instantly put my hand into my pocket, only to have the fact recalled to me that I possessed no money at all. All my capital had gone to the bottom in the *Fiji Princess*, and I was absolutely penniless. The position was an embarrassing one, and I was just reflecting what I had better do, when I heard Mr. Maybourne come out into the verandah again. He must have divined my difficulty, for without hesitation he discharged the debt, and, apologizing for not having thought of it, led me into the house.

Passing through an elegantly-furnished hall we entered the dining-room. Here breakfast was laid, and it was evidently from that meal that Mr. Maybourne had jumped up to receive us.

"Now, Mr. Wrexford," he cried, pointing to a chair, "sit yourself down yonder, and let me hear everything from the beginning to the end. Heaven knows I can hardly believe my good fortune. Half an hour ago I was the most miserable man under the sun; now that I have got my darling back safe and sound, I believe I am the happiest."

"Had you then heard of the wreck of the *Fiji Princess*?" I enquired.

"Here is a telegram I received last night," he said, handing me a paper he had taken from his pocket. "You see it is from Tenerife, and says that nothing has yet been heard of the vessel which was then more than a fortnight overdue. Agnes tells me that you were rescued by the *King of Carthage*. I understood she was expected about mid-day to-day, and I had

resolved to visit her as soon as she got into dock, in order to enquire if they had any tidings to report regarding the lost vessel. How little I expected to find that you were safe on board her, Aggie! Mr. Wrexford, you can have no idea of the agony I have suffered this week past."

"On the contrary," I answered, "I think I can very well imagine it."

"And now tell me your story. I must not be cheated of a single detail."

I saw from the way he looked at me that he expected me to do the narrating, so I did so, commencing with the striking of the vessel on the rock, and winding up with an account of our rescue by the *King of Carthage*. He listened with rapt attention until I had finished, and then turned to his daughter.

"Has Mr. Wrexford told me everything?" he asked with a smile.

"No," she answered. "He has not told you half enough. He has not told you that when I fell overboard one night, when we were off the Spanish coast, he sprang over after me and held me up until a boat came to our assistance. He has not told you that when the vessel sank he gave his own life-belt up to me, nor has he given you any idea of his constant kindness and self-sacrifice all through that dreadful time."

Mr. Maybourne rose from his chair as she finished speaking, and came round to where I sat. Holding out his hand to me, he said, with tears standing in his eyes:

"Mr. Wrexford, you are a brave man, and from the bottom of my heart I thank you. You have saved my girl, and brought her home safe to me; as long as I live I shall not be able to repay the debt I owe you. Remember, however, that henceforth I am your truest friend."

But I must draw a curtain over this scene. If I go into any further details I shall break down again as I did then. Suffice it that Mr. Maybourne refused to hear of my leaving his house as I proposed, but insisted that I should remain as his guest until I had decided what I intended to do with myself.

"For the future you must look upon this as your home in South Africa," he said. "I seem powerless to express my gratitude to you as I should like. But a time may come when I may even be able to do that."

"You have more than repaid me, I'm sure," I replied. "I have every reason to be deeply grateful to you for the way you have received me."

He replied in his former strain, and when he had done so, the conversation turned upon those who had been lost in the ill-fated *Fiji Princess*. It was easy to see that his brother-in-law's death cut him to the quick.

After luncheon that day I found myself alone with Mr. Maybourne. I was not sorry for this, as I wanted to sound him as to my future movements. As I have so often said, I had no sort of desire to remain in Cape Town, and judged that the sooner I was up country, and out of civilization, the better it would be for me.

"You must forgive my being frank with you, Mr. Wrexford," said my host, as we lit cigars preparatory to drawing our chairs into the verandah; "but I have gathered from what you yourself have said and from what my daughter has told me, that you are visiting South Africa on the chance of obtaining some sort of employment. Is this so?"

"That is exactly why I am here," I said. "I am most anxious to find something to do as soon as possible."

"In what direction will you seek it?" he asked. "What is your inclination? Remember, I may be able to help you."

"I am not at all particular," I answered. "I have knocked about the world a good deal, and I can turn my hand to most things. But if a choice were permitted me, I fancy I should prefer mining of some sort to anything else."

"Indeed! I had no idea you understood that sort of work."

"I have done a good deal of it," I replied, with a little touch of pride, for which next moment I found it difficult to account, considering the result to which it had brought me.

He asked one or two practical questions, which I was fortunately able to answer to his satisfaction, and then was silent for a couple of minutes or so. At last he consulted his pocket-book, and then turned to me.

"I fancy, Mr. Wrexford," he said, "that you have come in the nick of time for both of us. We may be able to do each other mutual services."

"I am very glad to hear that," I answered. "But in what possible way can I help you?"

"Well, the matter stands like this," he said. "As you are doubtless aware, my business is mostly in connection with mining, both in this colony and its neighbours. Well, information has lately reached me concerning what promises to prove

a first-class property in Mashonaland, eighty-five miles from Buluwayo. The mine has been excellently reported on, and is now being got into good going order. It only needs a capable manager at its head to do really well. Of course such a man is easily procured in a country where every man seems to be engaged in mining, more or less; and yet for that very self-same reason I am unable to make a selection. The available men all know too much, and I have private reasons for wishing this mine to be well looked after. Now the question is, would you care for the post?"

Needless to say, I embraced the opportunity in much the same manner as a hungry trout jumps at a fly. If I could only manage to get up there without being caught the appointment would suit me in every way. Mr. Maybourne seemed as pleased at my acceptance of it as I was at his offer; and when, after a little further conversation--in which I received many useful hints and no small amount of advice--it was revealed to his daughter, she struck me as being even more delighted than either her father or myself. I noticed that Mr. Maybourne looked at her rather anxiously for a moment as if he suspected there might be some sort of understanding between us, but whatever he may have thought he kept it to himself. He need, however, have had no fear on that score. Circumstances had placed an insurmountable barrier between myself and any thought of marriage with his daughter.

As the result of our conversation, and at my special desire, it was arranged that I should start for my post on the following day. Nobody could have been more eager than I was to be out in the wilds. But, with it all, my heart felt sad when I thought that after tomorrow I might never see the woman I so ardently loved again. Since the previous night, when on the promenade-deck of the steamer I had told her of my love, neither of us had referred in any way to the subject. So remote was the chance that I should ever be able to make her my wife that I determined, so far as possible, to prevent myself from giving any thought to the idea. But I was not destined after all to leave without referring to the matter.

That evening after dinner we were sitting in the verandah outside the drawing-room, when the butler came to inform Mr. Maybourne that a neighbour had called to see him. Asking us to excuse him for a few moments he left us and went into the house. When we were alone together I spoke to my companion of her father's kindness, and told her how much I appreciated it. She uttered a little sigh, and as this seemed such an extraordinary answer to my speech, I enquired the reason of it.

"You say you are going away to-morrow," she answered, "and yet you ask me why I sigh! Cannot you guess?"

"Agnes," I said, "you know I have no option but to go. Do not let us go over the ground we covered last night. It would be best not for both our sakes; you must see that yourself."

"You know that I love you, and I know that you love me--and yet you can go away so calmly. What can your love be worth?"

"You know what it is worth," I answered vehemently, roused out of myself by this accusation. "And if ever the chance occurs again of proving it you will be afforded another example. I cannot say more."

"And is it always to be like this, Gilbert," she asked, for the first time calling me by my Christian name. "Are we to be separated all our lives?"

"God knows--I fear so," I murmured, though it cut me to the heart to have to say the words.

She bowed her head on her hands with a little moan, while I, feeling that I should not be able to control myself much longer, sprang to my feet and went across to the verandah rails. For something like five minutes I stood looking into the dark garden, then I pulled myself together as well as I was able and went back to my chair.

"Agnes," I said, as I took possession of her little hand, "you cannot guess what it costs me to tell you how impossible it is for me ever to link my lot with yours. The reason why I cannot tell you. My secret is the bitterest one a man can have to keep, and it must remain locked in my own breast for all time. Had I met you earlier it might have been very different--but now our ways must be separate for ever. Don't think more hardly of me than you can help, dear. Remember only that as long as I live I shall call no other woman wife. Henceforward I will try to be worthy of the interest you have felt in me. No one shall ever have the right to say ought against me; and, if by any chance you hear good of me in the dark days to come, you will know that it is for love of you I rule my life. May God bless and keep you always."

She held up her sweet face to me, and I kissed her on the lips. Then Mr. Maybourne returned to the verandah; and, half-an-hour later, feeling that father and daughter would like a little time alone together before they retired to rest, I begged them to excuse me, and on a pretence of feeling tired my room.

Next morning after breakfast I drove with Mr. Maybourne into Cape Town, where I made the few purchases necessary

for my journey. In extension of the kindness he had so far shown me, he insisted on advancing me half my first year's salary--a piece of generosity for which you may be sure I was not ungrateful, seeing that I had not a halfpenny in the world to call my own. Out of this sum I paid the steamship company for my passage--much against their wish--obtained a ready-made rig out suitable for the rough life I should henceforth live, also a revolver, a rifle, and among other things a small gold locket which I wished to give to Agnes as a keepsake and remembrance of myself.

At twelve o'clock I returned to the house, and, after lunch, prepared to bid the woman I loved "good-bye." Of that scene I cannot attempt to give you any description--the pain is too keen even now. Suffice it that when I left the house I carried with me, in addition to a sorrow that I thought would last me all my life, a little square parcel which, on opening, I found to contain a photo of herself in a Russia leather case. How I prized that little present I will leave you to guess.

Two hours later I was in the train bound for Johannesburg.



CHAPTER 44. I TELL MY STORY.

SIX months had elapsed since I had left Cape Town, and on looking back on them now I have to confess that they constituted the happiest period of my life up to that time. I had an excellent appointment, an interesting, if not all-absorbing, occupation, comfortable quarters, and the most agreeable of companions any man could desire to be associated with. I was as far removed from civilization as the most misanthropic of men, living by civilized employment, could hope to get. Our nearest town, if by such a name a few scattered huts could be dignified, was nearly fifty miles distant, our mails only reached us once a week, and our stores once every three months. As I had never left the mine for half a day during the whole of the time I had been on it, I had seen no strange faces, and by reason of the distance and the unsettled nature of the country, scarcely half-a-dozen had seen mine.

"The Pride of the South," as the mine had been somewhat grandiloquently christened by its discoverer, was proving a better property than had even been expected, and to my astonishment, for I had made haste to purchase shares in it, my luck had turned, and I found myself standing an excellent chance of becoming a rich man.

One thing surprised me more and more every day, and that was my freedom from arrest; how it had come about that I was permitted to remain at large so long I could not understand. When I had first come up to Rhodesia I had found a danger in everything about me. In the rustling of the coarse veldt grass at night, the sighing of the wind through the trees, and even the shadows of the mine buildings and machinery. But when week after week and month after month went by and still no notice was taken of me by the police, my fears began to abate until, at the time of which I am about to speak, I hardly thought of the matter at all. When I did I hastened to put it away from me in much the same way as I would have done the remembrance of some unpleasant dream of the previous week. One consolation, almost cruel in its uncertainty, was always with me. If suspicion had not so far fallen on me in England, it would be unlikely, I argued, ever to do so; and in the joy of this thought I began to dream dreams of the happiness that might possibly be mine in the future. Was it to be wondered at therefore that my work was pleasant to me and that the wording of Mr. Maybourne's letters of praise seemed sweeter in my ears than the strains of the loveliest music could have been. It was evident that my star was in the ascendant, but, though I could not guess it then, my troubles were by no means over; and, as I was soon to find out, I was on the edge of the bitterest period of all my life.

Almost on the day that celebrated my seventh month in Mr. Maybourne's employ, I received a letter from him announcing his intention of starting for Rhodesia in a week's time, and stating that while in our neighbourhood he would embrace the opportunity of visiting "The Pride of the South." In the postscript he informed me that his daughter had decided to accompany him, and for this reason he would be glad if I would do my best to make my quarters as comfortable as possible in preparation for her. He, himself, he continued, was far too old a traveller to be worth considering.

I was standing at the engine-room door, talking to one of the men, when the store-keeper brought me my mail. After I had read my chief's letter, I felt a thrill go through me that I could hardly have diagnosed for pleasure or pain. I felt it difficult to believe that in a few weeks' time I should see Agnes again, be able to look into her face, and hear the gentle accents of her voice. The portrait she had given me of herself I carried continually about with me; and, as a proof of the inspection it received, I may say that it was already beginning to show decided signs of wear. Mr. Maybourne had done well in asking me to see to her comfort. I told myself I would begin my preparations at once, and it should go hard with me if she were not pleased with my arrangements when she arrived.

While I was mentally running my eye over what I should do, Mackinnon, my big Scotch overseer, came up from the shaft's mouth to where I stood, and reported that some timbering which I had been hurrying forward was ready for inspection. After we had visited it and I had signified my approval, I informed him of our employer's contemplated visit, and wound up by saying that his daughter would accompany him. He shook his head solemnly when he heard this.

"A foolish thing," he said, in his slow, matter-of-fact way, "a very foolish thing. This country's nae fit for a lady at present, as Mr. Maybourne kens well eno'. An' what's more, there'll be trouble among the boys (natives) before vera long. He'd best be out of it."

"My dear fellow," I said, a little testily I fear, for I did not care to hear him throw cold water on Mr. Maybourne's visit in this fashion, "you're always thinking the natives are going to give trouble, but you must confess that what you prophesy

never comes off.”

He shook his head more sagely than before.

“Ye can say what ye please,” he said, “I’m nae settin’ up for a prophet, but I canna help but see what’s put plain before my eyes. As the proverb says ‘Forewarned is forearmed.’ There’s been trouble an’ discontent all through this country-side for months past, an’ if Mr. Maybourne brings his daughter up here--well, he’ll have to run the risk of mischief happenin’ to the lass. It’s no business o’ mine, however. As the proverb says--‘Let the wilful gang their own gait.’”

Accustomed as he was to look on the gloomy side of things, I could not but remember that he had been in the country a longer time than I had, and that he had also had a better experience of the treacherous Matabele than I could boast.

“In your opinion, then,” I said, “I had better endeavour to dissuade Mr. Maybourne from coming up?”

“Nae! Nae! I’m na’ sayin’ that at all. Let him come by all means since he’s set on it. But I’m not going to say I think he’s wise in bringing the girl.”

With this ambiguous answer I had to be content. I must confess, however, that I went back to the house feeling a little uneasy in my mind. Ought I to write and warn Mr. Maybourne, or should I leave the matter to chance? As I did not intend to send off my mail until the following day, I determined to sleep on it.

In the morning I discovered that my fears had entirely vanished. The boys we employed were going about their duties in much the same manner as usual, and the half-dozen natives who had come in during the course of the day in the hope of obtaining employment, seemed so peaceably inclined that I felt compelled to dismiss Mackinnon’s suspicions from my mind as groundless, and determined on no account to alarm my friends in such needlessly silly fashion.

How well I remember Mr. and Miss Maybourne’s arrival! It was on a Wednesday, exactly three weeks after my conversation with Mackinnon just recorded, that a boy appeared with a note from the old gentleman to me. It was written from the township, and stated that they had got so far and would be with me during the afternoon. From that time forward I was in a fever of impatience. Over and over again I examined my preparations with a critical eye, discussed the meals with the cook to make sure that he had not forgotten a single particular, drilled my servants in their duties until I had brought them as near perfection as it was possible for me to get them, and in one way and another fussed about generally until it was time for my guests to arrive. I had fitted up my own bedroom for Miss Maybourne, and made it as comfortable as the limited means at my disposal would allow. Her father would occupy the overseer’s room, that individual sharing a tent with me at the back.

The sun was just sinking to his rest below the horizon when I espied a cloud of dust on the western veldt. Little by little it grew larger until we could distinctly make out a buggy drawn by a pair of horses. It was travelling at a high rate of speed, and before many minutes were over would be with us. As I watched it my heart began to beat so tumultuously that it seemed as if those around me could not fail to hear it. In the vehicle now approaching was the woman I loved, the woman whom I had made up my mind I should never see again.

Five minutes later the horses had pulled up opposite my verandah and I had shaken hands with my guests and was assisting Agnes to alight. Never before had I seen her look so lovely. She seemed quite to have recovered from the horrors of the shipwreck, and looked even stronger than when I had first seen her on the deck of the *Fiji Princess*, the day we had left Southampton. She greeted me with a fine show of cordiality, but under it it was easy to see that she was as nervous as myself. Having handed the horses and buggy over to a couple of my boys, I led my guests into the house I had prepared for them.

Evidently they had come with the intention of being pleased, for they expressed themselves as surprised and delighted with every arrangement I had made for their comfort. It was a merry party, I can assure you, that sat down to the evening meal that night--so merry, indeed, that under the influence of Agnes’ manner even Mackinnon forgot himself and ceased to prophesy ruin and desolation.

When the meal was finished we adjourned to the verandah and lit our pipes. The evening was delightfully cool after the heat of the day, and overhead the stars twinkled in the firmament of heaven like countless lamps, lighting up the sombre veldt till we could see the shadowy outline of trees miles away. The evening breeze rustled the long grass, and across the square the figure of our cook could just be seen, outlined against the ruddy glow of the fire in the hut behind him. How happy I was I must leave you to guess. From where I sat I could catch a glimpse of my darling’s face, and see the gleam of her rings as her hand rested on the arm of her chair. The memory of the awful time we had spent together on the

island, and in the open boat, came back to me with a feeling that was half pleasure, half pain. When I realized that I was entertaining them in my abode in Rhodesia, it seemed scarcely possible that we could be the same people.

Towards the end of the evening, Mr. Maybourne made an excuse and went into the house, leaving us together. Mackinnon had long since departed. When we were alone, Agnes leant a little forward in her chair, and said:

“Are you pleased to see me, Gilbert?”

“More pleased than I can tell you,” I answered, truthfully. “But you must not ask me if I think you were wise to come.”

“I can see that you think I was not,” she continued. “But how little you understand my motives. I could not----”

Thinking that perhaps she had said too much, she checked herself suddenly, and for a little while did not speak again. When she did, it was only about the loneliness of my life on the mine, and such like trivial matters. Illogical as men are, though I had hoped, for both our sakes, that she would not venture again on such delicate ground as we had traversed before we said good-bye, I could not help a little sensation of disappointment when she acted up to my advice. I was still more piqued when, a little later, she stated that she felt tired, and holding out her hand, bade me “good-night,” and went to her room.

Here I can only give utterance to a remark which, I am told, is as old as the hills--and that is, how little we men understand the opposite sex. From that night forward, for the first three or four days of her visit, Agnes' manner towards me was as friendly as of old, but I noticed that she made but small difference between her treatment of Mackinnon and the way in which she behaved towards myself. This was more than I could bear, and in consequence my own behaviour towards her changed. I found myself bringing every bit of ingenuity I possessed to bear on an attempt to win her back to the old state. But it was in vain! Whenever I found an opportunity, and hinted at my love for her, she invariably changed the conversation into such a channel that all my intentions were frustrated. In consequence, I exerted myself the more to please until my passion must have been plain to everyone about the place. Prudence, honour, everything that separated me from her was likely to be thrown to the winds. My infatuation for Agnes Maybourne had grown to such a pitch that without her I felt that I could not go on living.

One day, a little more than a week after their arrival, it was my good fortune to accompany her on a riding excursion to a waterfall in the hills, distant some seven or eight miles from the mine. On the way she rallied me playfully on what she called “my unusual quietness.” This was more than I could stand, and I determined, as soon as I could find a convenient opportunity, to test my fate and have it settled for good and all.

On reaching our destination, we tied our horses, by their reins, to a tree at the foot of the hill, and climbed up to the falls we had ridden over to explore. After the first impression, created by the wild grandeur of the scene, had passed, I endeavoured to make the opportunity I wanted.

“How strangely little circumstances recall the past. What place does that remind you of?” I asked, pointing to the rocky hill on the other side of the fall.

“Of a good many,” she answered, a little artfully, I'm afraid. “I cannot say that it reminds me of one more than another. All things considered, there is a great sameness in South African scenery.”

Cleverly as she attempted to turn my question off, I was not to be baulked so easily.

“Though the likeness has evidently not impressed you, it reminds me very much of Salvage Island,” I said, drawing a step closer to her side. “Half-way up that hill one might well expect to find the plateau and the cave.”

“Oh, why do you speak to me of that awful cave,” she said, with a shudder; “though I try to forget it, it always gives me a nightmare.”

“I am sorry I recalled it to your memory, then,” I answered. “I think in spite of the way you have behaved towards me lately, Agnes, you are aware that I would not give you pain for anything. Do you know that?”

As I put this question to her, I looked into her face. She dropped her eyes and whispered “Yes.”

Emboldened by my success I resolved to push my fate still further.

“Agnes,” I said, “I have been thinking over what I am going to say to you now for some days past, and I believe I am doing right. I want to tell you the story of my life, and then to ask you a question that will decide the happiness of the rest of it. I want you to listen and, when I have done, answer me from the bottom of your heart. Whatever you say I will abide by.”

She looked up at me with a startled expression on her face.

"I will listen," she said, "and whatever question you ask I will answer. But think first, Gilbert; do you really wish me to know your secret?"

"God knows I have as good reasons for wishing you to know as any man could have," I answered. "I can trust you as I can trust no one else in the world. I wish you to hear and judge me. Whatever you say, I will do and abide by it."

She put her little hand in mine, and having done so, seated herself on a boulder. Then, after a little pause, she bade me tell her all.

"In the first place," I said, "I must make a confession that may surprise you. My name is not Wrexford, as I have so long led you to suppose. It is Pennethorne. My father was Sir Anthony Pennethorne, of Polton-Penna, in Cornwall. I was educated at Eton and Oxford; and, as you will now see, I got no good from either. After a college scrape, the blame for which was thrown upon me, my father turned me out of England with a portion of my inheritance. I went to Australia, where I tried my hand at all sorts of employment, gold mining among the number. Details of my life out there, with one exception, would not interest you; so I will get on to the great catastrophe, the results of which were taking me out of England when I first met you. Up to this time ill-luck had constantly pursued me, and I had even known the direst poverty. You may imagine, therefore, what my feelings were when an old friend, a man with whom I had been partner on many gold-fields, told me of a place which he had discovered where, he said, there were prospects of sufficient gold to make us both millionaires half a dozen times over. He, poor fellow, was dying at the time, but he left his secret to me, bidding me take immediate advantage of it. True to my promise, I intended to set off to the place he had found as soon as he was buried, and having discovered it, to apply to Government for right to mine there, but fate was against me, and I was taken seriously ill. For weeks I hovered between life and death. When I recovered I saddled my horse, and, dreaming of all I was going to accomplish with my wealth, when I had obtained it, made my way across country by the chart he had given me. When I arrived at the spot it was only to learn that my greatest enemy in the world, a man who hated me as much as I did him, had filched my secret from me in my delirium, and had appropriated the mine. You cannot imagine my disappointment. I wanted money so badly, and I had counted so much on obtaining this, that I had almost come to believe myself possessed of it. What need to tell the rest? He became enormously rich, and returned to England. In the meantime my father had died, leaving me a sufficient sum, when carefully invested, to just keep me alive. With this to help me I followed my enemy home, resolved, if ever a chance arose, to revenge myself upon him. When I arrived I saw his name everywhere. I found his wealth, his generosity, his success in life, extolled in every paper I picked up; while I, from whom he had stolen that which gave him his power, had barely sufficient to keep me out of the workhouse. You must understand that I had been seriously ill, for the second time, just before I left Australia, and perhaps for this reason--but more so, I believe, on account of the great disappointment to which I had been subjected--I began to brood over my wrongs by day and night, and pine for revenge. I could not eat or sleep for it. Remember, I do not say this in any way to excuse myself, but simply to show you that my mind was undoubtedly not quite itself at the time. At any rate, to such a pitch of hatred did I at length work myself that it was as much as I could do to prevent myself from laying violent hands upon my enemy when I saw him in the public streets. After I had been entertaining the devil in this fashion for longer than was good for me, he in return sent one of his satellites to complete my ruin. That man--such a man as you could not picture to yourself--put before me a scheme for getting even with my enemy, so devilish that at first I could hardly believe he was in earnest. So insidiously did he tempt me, playing upon my hatred and increasing my desire for revenge, that at last I fell into his net as completely as he could wish. The means were immediately found for getting my victim into my clutches, and then nothing remained but to work out the hideous crime that had been planned for me."

I stopped for a moment and looked at Agnes, who was cowering with her face in her hands. She did not speak, so I continued my gruesome tale.

"I need not tell you how I got the man in my power, nor in what manner it was arranged that I should kill him. I will content myself with telling you that when I *had* got him, and could have killed him by lifting my little finger, difficult as you may find it to believe it, I saw your face before me imploring me to repent. There and then I determined to throw off my disguise, to let him know who I was, and what I intended to do to him; after that I would have bidden him go, and have left him to his own conscience. But, to my horror, when I got down from my box--for I was driving him in a cab--I found that in some devilish fashion my work had been anticipated for me--*the man was dead, killed by the same fatal agency that had been given to me to do the deed*. Try for one moment to imagine my position. In one instant I stood in that quiet

London street, stamped with the brand of Cain. Never again could I be like my fellow men. Henceforth I must know myself for what I was--a murderer, whose proper end should be the gallows. In an agony of terror I got rid of the body--left it in the street in fact--and fled for my very life. While the town was still abed and asleep I tramped away into the country, and at a suburban station caught the earliest train to Southampton. On arrival there I booked my passage in the *Fiji Princess* for South Africa, and went on board. The rest you know. Now, Agnes, that you have heard my wretched story, you can see for yourself why I was so desirous of getting out of civilization as quickly as possible. You can judge for yourself whether I was right or wrong in refusing to allow you to say you loved me. God knows you cannot judge me more harshly than I judge myself."

She looked up at me with terror-stricken eyes.

"But you did not mean to kill the man," she cried. "You repented --you said so just now yourself.

"If it had not been for me the man would not have died," I answered. "No, no! Agnes, you cannot make me out innocent of his death, however hard you try."

A look of fresh life darted into her face. It was as if she had been struck by a brilliant idea that might mean my salvation.

"But how do you know that you killed the man?" she asked. "Are you quite certain that he was dead when you looked at him?"

"Quite certain," I answered. "I examined him most carefully. Besides, I have made enquiries since and elicited the fact that he has never been seen or heard of since that awful night. There have been advertisements in the papers offering rewards for any information concerning him."

She did not reply to this, only sat and rocked herself to and fro, her face once more covered in her hands. I knelt beside her, but did not dare, for very shame, to attempt to comfort her.

"Agnes," I said, "speak to me. If it only be to say how much you loathe me. Your silence cuts me to the heart. Speak to me, tell me my fate, advise me as to what I shall do. I swear by God that whatever you tell me, that I will do without questioning or comment."

Still she did not answer. When I saw this I rose to my feet, and in my agony must have turned a little from her. This action evidently decided her, for she sprang up from the boulder on which she had hitherto been sitting, and, with a choking cry, fell into my arms and sobbed upon my shoulder.

"Gilbert," she moaned, "come what may, I believe in you. Nothing shall ever convince me that you would have killed the man who so cruelly wronged you. You hated him; you longed to be revenged on him; but you never would have murdered him when it came to the point."

In answer I drew her closer to me.

"Agnes, my good angel," I said; "what can I say to you for the comfort you give me? You have put fresh life into me. If only you believe in me, what do I care for the world? Heaven knows I did not mean to kill the man--but still the fact remains that he is dead, and through my agency. Though morally I am innocent, the law would certainly hold me guilty."

"You do not mean to say that the police will take you?" she cried, starting away from me with a gesture of horror.

"If I am suspected, there can be no doubt that they will do so. How it happens that I have not been arrested ere this I cannot imagine."

"But, Gilbert, you must not let them find you. You must go away--you must hide yourself."

"It would be no use, they would find me sooner or later, wherever I went."

"Oh, what can you do then? Come what may I shall not let you be taken. Oh God, I could not bear that."

She glanced wildly round, as if she fancied the minions of the law might already be on my track. I endeavoured to soothe her, but in vain. She was thoroughly frightened, and nothing I could say or do would convince her that I was not in immediate danger. At last, to try and bring her to a reasonable frame of mind, I adopted other tactics.

"But, Agnes, we are missing one point that is of vital importance," I said. "Knowing what I am, henceforward everything must be over between us."

"No, no!" she cried, with a sudden change of front. "On the other hand, you have shown me that there is more reason than ever that I *should* love you. If you are in danger, this is the time for me to prove what my affection is worth. Do you

value my love so lightly that you deem it only fit for fair weather? When the world is against you, you can see who are your friends."

"God bless you, darling," I said, kissing her sweet upturned face. "You know that there is no one in this world so much to me as you; and for that very reason I cannot consent to link your fate with such a terrible one as mine."

"Gilbert," she said, "if you repulse me now you will make me miserable for life. Oh, why must I plead so hard with you? Cannot you see that I am in earnest when I say I wish to share your danger with you?"

I was silent for a few moments. In what way could I make her see how base a thing it would be on my part to pull her down into the *maelstrom* of misery that might any day draw me to my doom? At last an idea occurred to me.

"Agnes," I said, "will you agree to a compromise? Will you promise me to take a year to think it over? If at the end of that time I am still at liberty I will go to your father, tell him my story as I have to-day told it to you, and, if he will still have anything to do with me, ask him for your hand. By that time I shall probably know my fate, you will be able to see things more clearly, and I shall not feel that I have taken advantage of your love and sympathy."

"But I want to be with you and to help you now."

"Believe me, you can help me best by agreeing to my proposal. Will you make me happy by consenting to what I wish?"

"If it will please you I will do so," she said, softly.

"God bless you, dear," I answered.

And thus the matter was concluded.



CHAPTER 45. A TERRIBLE SURPRISE.

Nearly a week had elapsed since I had made my confession to Agnes at the falls, and in three days it was Mr. Maybourne's intention to set out on his return journey to the South. During the whole of that period not one word had been said by Miss Maybourne regarding my story. But if she did not refer to it in speech it was easy to see that the subject was never absent from her mind. On two occasions I heard her father question her as to the reason of her quietness, and I saw that each time she found it a more difficult task to invent a satisfactory reply. What this meant to me you will readily understand. I could not sleep at night for thinking of it, and not once but a thousand times I bitterly regretted having burdened her mind with my unhappy secret.

Two afternoons prior to our guests' departure I was sitting in my verandah reading the letters which had been brought to the mine by the mailman at midday. Mr. Maybourne was sitting near me, also deep in his correspondence, while his daughter had gone to her own room for the same purpose. When I came to the end of my last epistle I eat with it in my hand, looking out across the veldt, and thinking of all that had happened since I had said good-bye to old England.

From one thing my thoughts turned to another; I thought of my wandering life in Australia, of poor old Ben Garman, of Markapurlie, and last of all of Bartrand. The memory of my hatred for him brought me home again to London, and I saw myself meeting Nikola in the Strand, and then accompanying him home to his extraordinary abode. As I pictured him seated in his armchair in that oddly-furnished room, all my old horror of him flashed back upon me. I seemed to feel the fascination of his eyes just as I had done that night when we visited that murderous cab in the room below.

While I was thinking of him, I heard a footstep on the path that led round the house, and presently Mackinnon appeared before me. He beckoned with his hand, and understanding that he desired to speak to me, I rose from my chair and went out to him.

"What is it?" I enquired, as I approached him, for at that hour he was generally in the depths of the mine. "Has anything gone wrong?"

"That's as ye care to take my words or no," he answered, wheeling about and leading me out of earshot of the house. There was something in his manner that frightened me, though I could not for the life of me have said why. When we reached the fence that separated my garden from the open veldt I stopped, and leaning on the rails, once more asked him why he had called me out.

"I told ye a fortnight ago that there was trouble brewing for us with the natives," he said impressively. "I warned ye a week ago that 'twas no better. Now I tell ye its close upon us, and if we're not prepared, God help us all."

"What do you mean? Don't speak in enigmas, man. Tell me straight out what you are driving at."

"Isn't that what I'm trying to do?" he said. "I tell ye the whole country's in a ferment. The Matabele are out, and in a few hours, if not before, we shall have proof of it."

"Good God, man!" I cried, "how do you know this? And why did you not make me see the importance of it before?"

"Ye can lead a horse to the water but ye canna make him drink,' says the proverb," he answered. "Ye can tell a man of danger, but ye canna make him see it. An' so 'twas with ye. I told ye my suspicions a fortnight past, but 'twas only this minute I came to know how bad it really was."

"And how have you come to hear of it now?"

"Step this way an' I'll show ye."

He led me to a small hut near the kitchen. On reaching it, he opened it and showed me a man stretched out upon a bed of sacks and grass. He was a white man, and seemed utterly exhausted.

"This man's name," said Mackinnon, as if he were exhibiting some human curiosity, "is Andrews. He's a prospector, and we've been acquent for years. Now tell your yarn, Andrews, and let Mr. Wrexford here see how bad the matter is."

"I've not much to tell, sir," said the man addressed, sitting up as he spoke. "It came about like this: I am a prospector, and I was out away back on the river there, never dreaming there was mischief in the wind. Then my boys began to drop hints that there was likely to be trouble, and I'd best keep my weather eye open. At first I didn't believe them, but when I got back to camp at mid-day to-day and found both my servants murdered, my bullocks killed, and my rifles and

everything else of value stolen, I guessed who had done it. Fortunately, they had passed on without waiting for me, so I got into the saddle again and came here post haste to warn you. I tell you this, the Matabele are rising. The impi that murdered my men is under one of the king's sons, and by this time they are not twenty miles distant from this spot. There can be no doubt that they are travelling this way. From what my boys told me, Buluwayo is surrounded, while three more impis are travelling night and day with the same object as the one I now warn you of, namely, to cut off the advance of the troops being pushed forward to oppose them from the south."

"Do you mean this? On your oath, are you telling me the truth?"

"God strike me dead if I'm not," he answered, solemnly. "Look at me, sir, I've made my way in here as hard as a man could come, riding for his life. That should be proof enough; but if it isn't, Mr. Mackinnon here will speak for me, I'm sure."

"That I will," said Mackinnon. "I've known you long enough, and always found you a straightforward man."

I stood for a few moments deep in thought.

"How far do you think they are away from us at the present moment?"

"Not more than twenty miles at most, sir. I left my camp on the river about mid-day, and I've been here about a quarter of an hour. I came in as hard as I could ride; say five hours riding at twelve miles an hour, making a big detour of about twenty miles, to avoid them. That should make between fifteen and twenty miles away now if they did five miles an hour straight across country."

"And you're sure they mean war?"

"There's not a doubt of it, sir. I know the vermin too well by this time not to be certain of that."

"Then I must tell Mr. Maybourne at once. Come with me Mackinnon, and you too, Andrews, if you can manage it. We must hold a council of war and see what's best to be done."

I led them across the small paddock to my office, and then went on to the house in search of my employer. I found him pacing up and down the verandah, looking rather disturbed.

"Wrexford, my dear fellow," he began, on seeing me, "I have been looking for you. I want a few moments' earnest conversation with you."

"And I with you, sir," I answered.

He led me beyond the verandah before he spoke again.

"You must hear me first. What I want to see you about is as important as life and death to us all. I have received a number of letters by the mail, and one and all warn me that there is likely to be trouble with the Matabele--The Chartered Company have seen it coming, I am told, and are taking all the necessary steps to secure life and property, but there is no knowing when the brutes may not be on us, and what they may not do if they start with the upper hand. Now, you see, if I were alone I should have no hesitation in remaining to see it out--but there is Agnes to consider; and, with a woman in the question, one has to think twice before one ventures upon such a course,"

"That is the very thing I came over to see you about, sir. Serious news has just reached me, and--well, to tell you the truth, we are in danger now, this very minute. If you will step over to my office, I have a man there who has seen the enemy within forty miles of this place, and he tells me they are advancing in our direction even now."

His face, for an instant, became deadly pale, and I noticed that he glanced anxiously at the sitting-room door.

"Steady, Wrexford, for heaven's sake," he said. "Not too loud, or Agnes will hear. We musn't frighten her before we are absolutely obliged. Come to the office and let me see this man for myself."

Together we walked over to my den where Mackinnon and Andrews were awaiting us.

Mr. Maybourne nodded to the former and then looked searchingly at the latter.

"I am told that you have seen the Matabele under arms to-day," he began, coming straight to the point, as was characteristic of him.

"My servants were killed by them, and my camp was looted about forty miles from this office," replied Andrews, meeting Mr. Maybourne's glance without flinching.

"At what number should you estimate them?"

"Roughly speaking, from what I saw of them from a hill nearly a mile distant, I should say they were probably two thousand strong. They were in full war dress, and from what my servants had hinted to me that morning, I gathered that

they are led by one of the king's sons."

"You have no doubt in your mind that they are coming this way?"

"I don't think there's a shadow of a doubt about it, sir. They're probably trying to effect a junction with another impi, and then they'll be ready to receive any troops that may come up against them from the South."

"There's something in that," said Mr. Maybourne, reflectively. "And now I am going to ask you the most important question of all, gentlemen. That is, what's to be done? If we abandon this place, the mine and the buildings will be wrecked for certain. At the best we can only reach the township, where we can certainly go into laager, but in my opinion we shall be even worse off there than we are here. What do you say?"

There could not be any doubt about the matter in my opinion. In the township we should certainly be able to make up a larger force, but our defences could not be made so perfect, while to abandon the mine was an act for which none of us were prepared.

"Very well then," continued Mr. Maybourne, when he had heard that we agreed with him, "in that case the best thing we can do is to form a laager here, and prepare to hold out until the troops that I have been told are on their way up can rescue us. How are we off for arms and ammunition, Wrexford?"

"I will show you," I said, and forthwith led the way through the office into a smaller room at the back. Here I pointed to an arm-rack in which twenty-two Winchester repeating rifles, a couple of Martini-Henris, and about thirty cutlasses were arranged.

"How many men capable of firing a decent shot can we muster?" asked Mr. Maybourne, when he had overhauled the weapons.

"Nineteen white men, including ourselves, and about half-a-dozen natives."

"And how much ammunition have we?"

"I can tell you in a moment," I answered, taking up a book from the table and consulting it. "Here it is. Two thousand cartridges for the repeating rifles, two hundred for the Martinis, and a thousand for the six revolvers I have in this drawer."

"A good supply, and I congratulate you on it. Now let us get to work. Ring the bell, Mr. Mackinnon, and call all the hands up to the house. I'll talk to them, and when I've explained our position, we'll get to work on the laager."

Ten minutes later every man had been informed of his danger, and was taking his share of work upon the barricades. Waggons, cases, sacks of flour, sheets of iron--everything, in fact, which would be likely to give shelter to ourselves and resistance to the enemy was pressed into our service, while all that would be likely to afford cover to the enemy for a hundred yards or so round the house was destroyed. Every tank that could be utilized was carried to the house and filled with water. The cattle were driven in, and when small earthworks had been thrown up and the stores had been stacked in a safe place, we felt we might consider ourselves prepared for a siege. By nightfall we were ready and waiting for the appearance of our foe. Sentries were posted, and in order that the township might be apprised of its danger and also that the troops who were hourly expected, as Mr. Maybourne had informed us, might know of our peril, a man was despatched on a fast horse with a letter to the inhabitants.

Having accompanied Mr. Maybourne round the square, and assured myself that our defences were as perfect as the limited means at our disposal would permit, our store of arms was brought from the office and the distribution commenced. A Winchester repeating rifle and a hundred cartridges, a cutlass, and a revolver, were issued to each white man, and after they were supplied the native boys were called up. To our astonishment and momentary dismay only one put in an appearance. The rest had decamped, doubtless considering discretion the better part of valour. When, however, we saw the stuff of which they were made this did not trouble us very much.

As soon as every man had received his weapons, and had had his post and his duties pointed out to him, Mr. Maybourne and I left them to their own devices, and went up to the house. The former had told his daughter of our danger, and for this reason I was prepared to find her, if not terrified, at least showing some alarm. But to my amazement I discovered her hard at work preparing a meal for the garrison, just as calmly and quietly as if nothing out of the common were occurring. She greeted me with a smile, showed me her puddings boiling on the fire, and pointed to a number of buckets which stood about the verandah. These were filled with some peculiar-looking fluid; and I enquired what it might be. In answer I was told that it was oatmeal and water.

"If we are to fight," said this daughter of war, "you will find it thirsty work. I shall put these buckets, with mugs, at

convenient places, so that you may assuage your thirst if occasion serves.”

I noticed also that she had prepared a large quantity of lint in case it should be required, and had arranged a number of mattresses in the verandah. Her courage put fresh heart into me, as without doubt it did into everyone else who saw her. I told her that she was braver than the boldest man amongst us, and she thereupon showed that she still had sufficient of the woman left in her to blush with pleasure at the compliment.

“If the enemy were only forty miles away at midday,” said Mr. Maybourne as we carried the men’s tea out into the open to them, “they ought to be close at hand now. When we’ve done our meal we’ll post extra sentries; for though I do not for a moment expect they’ll attack us in the dark, it would never do to allow ourselves to be surprised.”

I agreed with him; and, accordingly, as soon as our tea was finished, men were placed not only at the four corners of the laager, but at equal distances between them. The remainder lay down to rest wherever they could make themselves most comfortable. I found myself about the only exception to the rule; and, do what I would, I could not sleep. Having tried for an hour and a half, and found it still impossible, I went across to the verandah and sat down in one of the cane chairs there. I had not been there many moments before I was joined by Agnes, who seated herself beside me. I reproved her for not resting after her labours of the day.

“I could not sleep,” she answered. “Brave as you call me, I am far too nervous to rest. Do you really think the enemy will attack us in the morning?”

“Not knowing their plans, I cannot say,” I replied, “but I must confess it looks terribly like it.”

“In that case I want you to promise me something, Gilbert.”

“What is it?” I asked. “You know there is nothing I would not do for you, Agnes. What am I to promise?”

“That if we are overpowered you will not let me fall into their hands alive. You may think me a coward, but I dread that more than any thought of death.”

“Hush! You must not talk like that. Have no fear, we will not let you fall into their hands. You know that there is not a man upon the mine who would not give his life for you.”

She leaned a little forward and looked into my face. “I know you would protect me, would you not?”

“Wait and see. The man who touches you, Agnes, will have to do it over my dead body. Do you know that to-night, for some reason or other, I feel more superstitious than I have ever done before. I can’t rid myself of the thought that I am near the one vital crisis of my life.”

“What do you mean, Gilbert? You frighten me.”

“I cannot tell you what I mean, for I don’t know myself. I think I’m what the Scotch call *‘fey’*”

“I have prayed to God for you,” she said. “He who has protected us before will do so again. Let us do our duty and leave the rest to Hun.”

“Amen to that,” I answered solemnly; and then with a whispered “good-night” she got up and went into the house again.

Hour after hour I sat on in the verandah, as much unable to sleep as I had been at the beginning. At intervals I made a circuit of the sentries, and convinced myself that no man was sleeping at his post, but for the greater part of the time I sat staring at the winking stars. Though I searched the open space outside the laager over and over again, not a sign of the enemy could I discover. If they were there, they must have been keeping wonderfully quiet. The sighing of the breeze in the long veldt grass was the only sound that I could distinguish.

I heard the clock in the house behind me strike one, two, and then three. By the time the last hour sounded, it was beginning to grow light. From where I sat in the verandah, I could just discern the shadowy outline of the waggons, and distinguish the figures of the sentries as they paced to and fro at their posts.

Thinking it was time to be astir, I rose from my chair and went into the house to help Agnes by lighting the fire for her, and putting the kettles on to boil.

I had just laid the sticks, and was about to set a match to them, when a shot rang out on the northern side of the laager. It was immediately followed by another from the south. I waited to hear no more, but snatched up my rifle from the table and ran out into the open. Before I had crossed the verandah, shots were being fired in all directions, and on reaching my post, I discovered a black crowd advancing at a run towards us.

“Steady men, steady,” I heard Mr. Maybourne shout as he took up his station. “Don’t lose your heads whatever you do. Keep under cover, and don’t fire till you’re certain your shot will tell.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the enemy were upon us, brandishing their assegais and shields, and yelling in a manner that would have chilled the blood of the oldest veteran. It was the first time I had ever fired a shot at my fellow man, and for the moment I will confess to feeling afraid. However, that soon passed, and I found myself taking aim, and firing as coolly as the best of them. Though I was hardly conscious that I had pulled the trigger, I saw the man directly in front of me—a fine, tall fellow with a nodding head-dress of feathers—suddenly throw up his arms and fall forward on his face, tearing at the ground with his hands in his death agony. But I was not able to do more than glance at him before two others were upon me. This time I fired with more deliberation than before, with the result that both went down, one after the other, like ninepins. Then for what seemed a year, but must in reality have been about three minutes, I continued to fire, depressing the finger lever between each shot and tipping out the empty cartridge with automatic regularity. In front of my defences a ghastly pile of bodies was fast accumulating, and by craning my neck to right and left, I could discern similar heaps before the shelters of my next-door neighbours.

This desire to ascertain how my friends were getting on was, however, nearly my undoing; for if I had been more intent upon my own concerns, I should have seen a man wriggling along on the ground towards me. Just, however, as he was about to hurl his assegai I caught sight of him, and brought my rifle to the shoulder. Seeing this, he rose to his feet with a jump, and hurled his spear. I dodged with the quickness of lightning, and heard it strike the tyre of the wheel behind me. At the same instant I covered him and pulled the trigger. To my horror the rifle did not go off. I had fired my nine shots, and the magazine was empty. But my wits did not desert me for long. Before the savage had time to clamber on to the wheel and raise his knob-kerrie, I was within striking distance, and, swinging my rifle by the barrel high into the air, brought the butt down upon his head with a crash that might have been heard yards away. It crushed in his skull like an egg-shell, and he fell like a log and never moved again.

As he went down a sudden peace descended upon the field, and for a moment or two every man wondered what had happened. The smoke quickly cleared away, and when it did we saw that the foe had retired. I accordingly clambered back to my old position, and looked about me. My throat was like a lime kiln, and my eyes were dry as dust. But I was not going to take any refreshment, though a bucket stood quite close to me, until I had refilled my rifle. This done, I crossed to the bucket, filled the mug and drank its contents with a relish such as I had never known in my life before. When I had handed it to another man, I turned about and endeavoured to take stock of our company. From where I stood I could see two men stretched out upon the ground. The one nearest me I knew instantly. It was Mackinnon, and a single glance was sufficient to tell me that he was dead. The other I could not for the moment identify. Mr. Maybourne, I was relieved to see, was unhurt save for a wound on his left hand, which he explained he had received in a hand-to-hand encounter in his corner.

“We’ve taught the brutes a lesson in all conscience,” he said. “I don’t fancy they’ll be as eager next time. How many men have we lost?”

In order to find out, we walked quickly round our defences, encouraging the garrison as we went, and bidding them replenish the magazines of their rifles while they had the chance.

On the other side of the house we discovered Agnes, busily engaged binding up the wounds of those who had been hurt. She was deadly pale, but her bravery was not a bit diminished. When we got back to our own quarters we had counted three dead men, two placed *hors de combat* by their wounds, and five more or less cut and scratched. Of the enemy we estimated that at least a hundred had fallen before our rifles, never to rise again.

For something like half-an-hour we stood at our posts, waiting to be attacked, but the foe showed no sign of moving. I was just wondering what the next move would be when I heard a shout from the right. I gripped my rifle and peered ahead of me, but there was nothing to be seen save the foe crouching behind their shelters in the distance.

“What is it?” I cried to my right-hand neighbour. “What do they see?”

“A horseman,” he replied, “and coming in our direction.”

“Is he mad?” I cried, “or doesn’t he see his danger?”

My informant did not reply, and a moment later I saw for myself the person referred to. He was mounted on a grey horse, and was riding as fast as his animal could travel in our direction. I turned my eyes away from him for a moment. When I looked again I saw a man rise from behind a bush and hurl a spear at him. The cruel weapon was thrown with

unerring aim and struck the horse just behind the saddle. He leapt into the air, and then with a scream of agony that could be heard quite plainly where we all stood watching, dashed frantically towards us. He had not, however, gone a hundred yards before he put his foot into a hole, and fell with a crash to the ground, to lie there motionless. His neck was broken, so we discovered later.

From where I stood, to the place where the man and beast lay, was scarcely eighty yards; thence, on to the spot where the enemy were in ambush, not more than a hundred. For some reason--why, I shall never be able to explain--an irresistible desire to save the injured man came over me. I could not have resisted it, even had I wished to do so. Accordingly, I placed my rifle against the axle, sprang upon the box of the waggon wheel, vaulted over, and ran as hard as I could go towards the victim of the accident. Ahead of me I could distinctly see the nodding plumes of the foe as they crouched behind their enormous shields. They did not, however, move, and I was thus enabled to reach the man's side, and to take him in my arms unmolested. I had not gone ten yards on my return journey, however, before I heard their yells, and knew that they were after me. Fortunately, I had nearly a hundred and twenty yards start; but I had a heavy man to carry, and was quite out of breath. However, I was not going to be beaten, so putting out every ounce of strength I boasted in my body, I raced on. By the time I reached the waggons again, the foe were not fifty yards behind me. A couple of assegais whistled passed my ears as I climbed over the wheel and dropped my burden on the ground, but fortunately neither hit me. So exhausted was I that for a moment I leant against the waggon, unable to move. But the instinct of self-preservation gave me strength, and picking up my rifle I let drive blindly at the nearest of the foe who was already on the wheel before me. I saw the man's forehead open out like a cracked walnut as my shot caught it, and a moment later he fell forward on the tyre--dead. I threw him off in time to shoot the next man as he took his place. Of the following five minutes my only recollection is a sense of overpowering heat; a throat and mouth parched like the sands of the Great Sahara; a rifle growing every moment hotter in my hand, and dominating all the necessity of stemming, at any cost, the crowd of black humanity that seemed to be overwhelming me. How long the fight lasted I cannot say. But at last a cheer from the other side of the laager reached me, and almost at the same instant the enemy turned tail and fled for their lives. Then, with an empty rifle at my feet, a dripping cutlass in one hand, and a still smoking revolver in the other, I leant against the waggon and laughed hysterically till I fell fainting to the ground.



CHAPTER 46. THE 3RD END.

WHEN I recovered consciousness I found a stranger dressed in uniform kneeling beside me. What was more singular still I was not under the waggon as before, but was lying surrounded by a dozen or so of my comrades in the verandah of my own house. Agnes was kneeling beside me, and her father was holding a basin of water at my feet.

"There is nothing at all to be alarmed about, my dear young lady," the man in uniform was saying as he felt my pulse. "Your friend here will live to fight another day, or a hundred other days for that matter. By this time to-morrow he'll be as well as ever." Then, turning to me, he asked: "how do you feel now?"

I replied that I felt much stronger; and then, looking up at Mr. Maybourne, enquired if we had beaten off the enemy.

"They have been utterly routed," replied the gentleman I addressed. "The credit, however, is due to Captain Haviland and his men; but for their timely arrival I fear we should have been done for. Flesh and blood could not have stood the strain another half hour."

"Stuff and nonsense," said the doctor, "for such I afterwards discovered he was, all the credit is due to yourselves; and, by George, you deserve it. A finer stand was never made in this country, or for that matter in any other."

After a few minutes' rest and another sip of brandy, I managed to get on to my feet. It was a sad sight I had before me. Stretched out in rows beyond the verandah rails were the bodies of the gallant fellows who had been killed--twelve in number. On rough beds placed in the verandah itself and also in the house were the wounded; while on the plain all round beyond the laager might have been seen the bodies of the Matabele dead. On the left of the house the regiment of mounted infantry, who had so opportunely come to our assistance, were unsaddling after chasing the enemy, and preparing to camp.

After I had had a few moments' conversation with the doctor, Mr. Maybourne and Agnes came up to me again, and congratulated me on having saved the stranger's life. The praise they gave me was altogether undeserved, for, as I have already explained, I had done the thing on the spur of the moment without for an instant considering the danger to which I had exposed myself. When they had finished I enquired where the man was, and in reply they led me into the house.

"The doctor says it is quite a hopeless case," said Agnes, turning to me in the doorway; "the poor fellow must have injured his spine when his horse fell with him."

I followed her into the room which had once been my own sleeping apartment. It was now filled with wounded. The man I had brought in lay upon a mattress in the corner by the window, and, with Agnes beside me, I went across to him. Once there I looked down at his face, and then, with a cry that even on pain of death I could not have kept back, I fell against the wall, as Agnes afterwards told me, pallid to the very lips. I don't know how to tell you who I saw there; I don't know how to make you believe it, or how to enable you to appreciate my feelings. One thing was certain, lying on the bed before me, his head bandaged up, and a bushy beard clothing the lower half of his face, was *no less a person than Richard Bartrand--my old enemy and the man I believed myself to have murdered in London so many months before*. I could hardly believe my eyes; I stared at him and then looked away--only to look back again half expecting to find him gone. Could this be any mistake? I asked myself. Could it be only a deceiving likeness, or an hallucination of an overtaxed brain? Hardly knowing what I did I dragged Agnes by the wrist out of the house to a quiet corner, where I leant against the wall feeling as if I were going to faint again.

"What is the matter, Gilbert?" she cried. "Oh, what is the matter with you?"

"Matter!" I almost shouted in my joy. "This is the matter. I am free--free--free! Free to marry you--free to do as I please, and live as I please, and go where I please!!! For there in that bed is my old enemy, the man I told you I had killed."

For a second she must have thought me mad, for I noticed she shrank a step away from me, and looked at me with an apprehensive glance. But she soon recovered her composure, and asked if I were certain of what I said.

"As certain as I am that you are standing before me now," I answered. "I should know him anywhere. Where is the doctor?"

A moment later I had found the doctor.

"Doctor," I said, "there is a man in that room yonder whom, I am told, you say has a broken back. He is unconscious. Will he remain so until he dies?"

"Most probably," was the other's matter-of-fact reply as he began to bind up the arm of the man he had been operating on. "Why do you ask?"

"Because it is a matter of the most vital importance that I should speak with him before he dies. All the happiness of my life and another's depends upon it."

"Very well. Don't worry yourself. I'll see what I can do for you. Now go away and be quiet. I'm busy."

I went away as he ordered me, and leant against the verandah rails at the back of the house. My head was swimming, and I could hardly think coherently. Now that Bartrand was alive, every obstacle was cleared away--I was free to marry Agnes as soon as her father would let me; free to do whatever I pleased in the world. The reaction was almost more than I could bear. No words could over-estimate my relief and joy.

Half an hour later the doctor came to me.

"Your man is conscious now," he said. "But you'd better look sharp if you want to ask him anything. He won't last long."

I followed him into the house to the corner where the sick man lay. As soon as he saw me, Bartrand showed with his eyes that he recognized me.

"Pennethorne," he whispered, as I knelt by the bed, "this is a strange meeting. Do you know I've been hunting for you these nine months past?"

"Hunting for me?" I said. "Why, I thought you dead!"

"I allowed it to be supposed that I was," he answered. "I can tell you, Pennethorne, that money I swindled you out of never brought me an ounce of luck--nor Gibbs either. He turned cocktail and sent his share back to me almost at once. He was drinking himself to death on it, I heard. Now look at me, I'm here--dying in South Africa. They tell me you saved me to-day at the risk of your life."

"Never mind that now," I said. "We've got other things to talk about."

"But I must mind," he answered. "Listen to what I have to tell you, and don't interrupt me. Three nights before I disappeared last winter, I made my will, leaving you everything. It's more than the value of the mine, for I brought off some big speculations with the money, and almost doubled my capital. You may not believe it, but I always felt sorry for you, even when I stole your secret. I'm a pretty bad lot, but I couldn't steal your money and not be a bit sorry. But, funny as it may seem to say so, I hated you all the time too--hated you more than any other man on God's earth. Now you've risked your life for me, and I'm dying in your house. How strangely things turn out, don't they?"

Here the doctor gave him something to drink, and bade me let him be quiet for a few moments. Presently Bartrand recovered his strength, and began again.

"One day, soon after I arrived in London from Australia, I fell in tow with a man named Nikola. I tell you, Pennethorne, if ever you see that man beware of him, for he's the Devil, and nobody else. I tell you he proposed the most fiendish things to me and showed me such a side of human nature that, if I hadn't quarrelled with him and not seen so much of him I should have been driven into a lunatic asylum. I can tell you it's not altogether a life of roses to be a millionaire. About this time I began to get threatening letters from men all over Europe trying to extort money from me for one purpose or another. Eventually Nikola found out that I was the victim of a secret society. How he managed it, the deuce only knows. They wanted money badly, and finally Nikola told me that for half a million he could get me clear. If I did not pay up I'd be dead, he said, in a month. But I wasn't to be frightened like that, so I told him I wouldn't give it. From that time forward attempts were made on my life until my nerve gave way--and in a blue funk I determined to forego the bulk of my wealth and clear out of England in the hopes of beginning a new life elsewhere."

He paused once more for a few moments; his strength was nearly exhausted, and I could see with half an eye that the end was not far distant now. When he spoke again his voice was much weaker, and he seemed to find it difficult to concentrate his ideas.

"Nikola wanted sixty thousand for himself, I suppose for one of his devilments," he said, huskily. "He used every means in his power to induce me to give it to him, but I refused time after time. He showed me his power, tried to

hypnotize me even, and finally told me I should be a dead man in a week if I did not let him have the money. I wasn't going to be bluffed, so I declined again. By this time I distrusted my servants, my friends, and everybody with whom I came in contact. I could not sleep, and I could not eat. All my arrangements were made, and I was going to leave England on the Saturday. On the Wednesday Nikola and I were to meet at a house on special business. We saw each other at a club, and I called a hansom, intending to go on and wait for him. I had a dreadful cold, and carried some cough drops in a little silver box in my pocket. He must have got possession of it, and substituted some preparations of his own. Feeling my cough returning, I took one in the cab as I drove along. After that I remember no more till I came round and found myself lying in the middle of the road, half covered with snow, and with a bruise the size of a tea-cup on the back of my head. For some reason of his own Nikola had tried to do for me; and the cabman, frightened at my state, had pitched me out and left me. As soon as I could walk, and it was daylight, I determined to find you at your hotel, in order to hand over to you the money I had stolen from you, and then I was going to bolt from England for my life. But when I reached Blankerton's I was told that you had left. I traced your luggage to Aberdeen; but, though I wasted a week looking, I couldn't find you there. Three months ago I chanced upon a snapshot photograph taken in Cape Town, and reproduced in an American illustrated paper. It represented one of the only two survivors of the *Fiji Princess*, and I recognised you immediately, and followed you, first to Cape Town and then, bit by bit, out here. Now listen to me, for I've not much time left. My will is in my coat-pocket; when I'm dead, you can take it out and do as you like with it. You'll find yourself one of the richest men in the world, or I'm mistaken. I can only say I hope you'll have better luck with the money than I have had. I'm glad you've got it again; for, somehow, I'd fixed the idea in my head that I shouldn't rest quietly in my grave unless I restored it to you. One caution! Don't let Nikola get hold of it, that's all--for he's after you, I'm certain. He's been tracking you down these months past; and I've heard he's on his way here. I'm told he thinks I'm dead. He'll be right in his conjecture soon."

"Bartrand," I said, as solemnly as I knew how, "I will not take one halfpenny of the money. I am firmly resolved upon that. Nothing shall ever make me."

"Not take it? But it's your own. I never had any right to it from the beginning. I stole your secret while you were ill."

"That may be; but I'll not touch the money, come what may."

"But I must leave it to somebody."

"Then leave it to the London hospitals. I will not have a penny of it. Good heavens, man, you little know how basely I behaved towards you!"

"I've not time to hear it now, then," he answered. "Quick! let me make anew will while I've strength to sign it."

Pens, paper, and ink were soon forthcoming; and at his instruction Mr. Maybourne and the doctor between them drafted the will. When it was finished the dying man signed it, and then those present witnessed it, and the man lay back and closed his eyes. For a moment I thought he was gone, but I was mistaken. After a silence of about ten minutes he opened his eyes and looked at me.

"Do you remember Markapurlie?" he said. That was all. Then, with a grim smile upon his lips, he died, just as the clock on the wall above his head struck twelve. His last speech, for some reason or other, haunted me for weeks.

Towards sundown that afternoon I was standing in the verandah of my house, watching a fatigue party digging a grave under a tree in the paddock beyond the mine buildings, when a shout from Mr. Maybourne, who was on his way to the office, attracted my attention. "When I reached his side, he pointed to a small speck of dust about a mile to the northward.

"It's a horseman," he cried; "but who can it be?"

"I have no possible notion," I answered; "but we shall very soon see."

The rider, whoever he was, was in no hurry. When he came nearer, we could see that he was cantering along as coolly as if he were riding in Rotten Row. By the time he was only a hundred yards or so distant, I was trembling with excitement. Though I had never seen the man on horseback before, I should have known his figure anywhere. *It was Dr. Nikola*. There could be no possible doubt about that. Bartrand was quite right when he told me that he was in the neighbourhood.

I heard Mr. Maybourne say something about news from the township, but the real import of his words I did not catch. I seemed to be watching the advancing figure with my whole being. When he reached the laager he sprang from his horse, and then it was that I noticed Mr. Maybourne had left my side and was giving instructions to let him in. I followed to receive him.

On reaching the inside of our defences, Nikola raised his hat politely to Mr. Maybourne, while he handed his reins to a

trooper standing by.

"Mr. Maybourne, I believe," he said. "My name is Nikola. I am afraid I am thrusting myself upon you in a very unseemly fashion, and at a time when you have no desire to be burdened with outsiders. My friendship for our friend Wrexford here must be my excuse. I left Buluwayo at daylight this morning in order to see him."

He held out his hand to me and I found myself unable to do anything but take it. As usual it was as cold as ice. For the moment I was so fascinated by the evil glitter in his eyes that I forgot to wonder how he knew my assumed name. However, I managed to stammer out something by way of a welcome, and then asked how long he had been in South Africa.

"I arrived two months ago," he answered, "and after a week in Cape Town, where I had some business to transact, made my way up here to see you. It appears I have arrived at an awkward moment, but if I can help you in any way I hope you will command my services. I am a tolerable surgeon, and I have the advantage of considerable experience of assegai wounds."

While he was speaking the bell rang for tea, and at Mr. Maybourne's invitation Dr. Nikola accompanied us to where the meal was spread--picnic fashion--on the ground by the kitchen door. Agnes was waiting for us, and I saw her start with surprise when her father introduced the newcomer as Dr. Nikola, a friend of Mr. Wrexford's. She bowed gravely to him, but said nothing. I could see that she knew him for the man Bartrand had warned me against, and for this reason she was by no means prepossessed in his favour.

During the meal Nikola exerted all his talents to please. And such was his devilish--I can only call it by that name--cleverness, that by the time we rose from the meal he had put himself on the best of terms with everyone. Even Agnes seemed to have, for the moment, lost much of her distrust of him. Once out in the open again I drew Nikola away from the others, and having walked him out of earshot of the house, asked the meaning of his visit.

"Is it so hard to guess?" he said, as he seated himself on the pole of a waggon, and favoured me with one of his peculiar smiles. "I should have thought not."

"I have not tried to guess," I answered, having by this time resolved upon my line of action; "and I do not intend to do so. I wish you to tell me."

"My dear Pennethorne-Wrexford, or Wrexford-Pennethorne," he said quietly, "I should advise you not to adopt that tone with me. You know very well why I have put myself to the trouble of running you to earth."

"I have not the least notion," I replied, "and that is the truth. I thought I had done with you when I said good-bye to you in Golden Square that awful night."

"Nobody can hope to have done with me," he answered, "when they do not act fairly by me."

"Act fairly by you? What do you mean? How have I not acted fairly by you?"

"By running away in that mysterious fashion, when it was agreed between us that I should arrange everything. You might have ruined me."

"Still I do not understand you! How might I have ruined you?"

This time I took him unawares. He looked at me for a moment in sheer surprise.

"I should advise you to give up this sort of thing," he said, licking his lips in that peculiar cat-like fashion I had noticed in London. "Remember I know everything, and one word in our friend Maybourne's ear, and--well--you know what the result will be. Perhaps he does not know what an illustrious criminal he is purposing to take for a son-in-law."

"One insinuation like that again, Nikola," I cried, "and I'll have you put off this place before you know where you are. You dare to call *me* a criminal--*you*, who plotted and planned the murders that shocked and terrified all England!"

"That I do not admit. I only remember that I assisted you to obtain your revenge on a man who had wronged you. On summing up so judiciously, pray do not forget that point."

Nikola evidently thought he had obtained an advantage, and was quick to improve on it.

"Come, come," he said, "what is the use of our quarrelling like a pair of children? All I want of you is an answer to two simple questions."

"What are your questions?"

"I want to know, first, what you did with Bartrand's body when you got rid of it out of the cab."

"You really wish to know that?"

He nodded.

"Then come with me," I said, "and I'll tell you." I led him into the house, and, having reached the bed in the corner, pulled down the sheet.

He bent over the figure lying there so still, and then started back with a cry of surprise. For a moment I could see that he was *non-plussed* as he had probably not been in his life before, but by the time one could have counted twenty, this singular being was himself again.

"I congratulate you," he said, turning to me and holding out his hand. "The king has come into his own again. You are now one of the richest men in the world, and I can ask my second question."

"Be certain first," I said. "I inherit nothing from Mr. Bartrand."

"What do you mean by that? I happen to know that his will was made in your favour."

"You are quite mistaken. He made a later will this afternoon, leaving all his money and estates to four London hospitals."

Nikola's face went paler than I had ever seen it yet. His thin lips trembled perceptibly. The man was visibly anxious.

"You will excuse my appearing to doubt you, I hope," he said, "but may I see that will?"

I called Mr. Maybourne into the room and asked him if he had any objection to allowing Dr. Nikola to see the paper in question. He handed it to him without hesitation, keeping close to his elbow while he perused it. The Doctor read it slowly from beginning to end, examined the signature, noted the names of the executors, and also of the witnesses, and when he had done so, returned it to Mr. Maybourne with a bow.

"Thank you," he said, politely. "It is excellently drawn up, and, with your evidence against me, I fear it would be foolish for me to dispute it. In that case, I don't think I need trouble your hospitality any further."

Then, turning to me, he led me from the house across to where his horse was standing.

"Good-bye, Pennethorne," he said. "All I can say of you is that your luck is greater than your cleverness. I am not so *blase* but I can admire a man who can surrender three millions without a sigh. I must confess I am vulgar enough to find that it costs me a pang to lose even my sixty thousand. I wanted it badly. Had my *coup* only come off, and the dead man in there not been such an inveterate ass, I should have had the whole amount of his fortune in my hands by this time, and in six months I would have worked out a scheme that would have paralyzed Europe. As it is, I must look elsewhere for the amount. When you wish to be proud of yourself, try to remember that you have balked Dr. Nikola in one of his best-planned schemes, and saved probably half-a-million lives by doing so. Believe me, there are far cleverer men than you who have tried to outwit me and failed. I suppose you will marry Miss Maybourne now. Well, I wish you luck with her. If I am a judge of character, she will make you an able wife. In ten years' time you will be a commonplace rich man, with scarcely any idea outside your own domestic circle, while I--well the devil himself knows where or what I shall be then. I wonder which will be the happier? Now I must be off. Though you may not think it, I always liked you, and if you had thrown in your lot with me, I might have made something of you. Good-bye."

He held out his hand, and as he did so he looked me full in the face. For the last time I felt the influence of those extraordinary eyes. I took the hand he offered and bade him good-bye with almost a feeling of regret, mad as it may seem to say so, at the thought that in all probability I should never see him again. Next moment he was on his horse's back and out on the veldt making for the westward. I stood and watched him till he was lost in the gathering gloom, and then went slowly back to the house thinking of the change that had come into my life, thanking God for my freedom.



Three months have passed since the events just narrated took place, and I am back in Cape Town again, finishing the writing of this story of the most adventurous period of my life, in Mr. Maybourne's study. To-morrow my wife (for I have been married a week to-day) and I leave South Africa on a trip round the world. What a honeymoon it will be!

"The Pride of the South," you will be glad to hear, has made gallant strides since the late trouble in Rhodesia, and as my shares have quadrupled in value, to say nothing of the other ventures in which I have been associated with my father-in-law, I am making rapid progress towards becoming a rich man. And now it only remains for me to bring my story to a close. By way of an epilogue let me say that no better, sweeter, or more loyal wife than I possess could possibly be desired

by any mortal man. I love her with my whole heart and soul, as she loves me, and I can only hope that every masculine reader who may have the patience to wade through these, to me, interminable pages, may prove as fortunate in his choice as I have been. More fortunate, it is certain, he could not be.



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BOOK IV

THE EXPERIMENT

CHAPTER 47. TIRED OF LIFE

IT is sad enough at any time for a man to be compelled to confess himself a failure, but I think it will be admitted that it is doubly so at that period of his career when he is still young enough to have some flickering sparks of ambition left, while he is old enough to be able to appreciate at their proper value the overwhelming odds against which he has been battling so long and unsuccessfully.

This was unfortunately my condition. I had entered the medical profession with everything in my favour. My father had built up a considerable reputation for himself, and, what he prized still more, a competency as a country practitioner of the old-fashioned sort in the west of England. I was his only child, and, as he was in the habit of saying, he looked to me to carry the family name up to those dizzy heights at which he had often gazed, but upon which he had never quite been able to set his foot. A surgeon I was to be, willy-nilly, and it may have been a throw-back to the parental instinct alluded to above, that led me at once to picture myself flying at express speed across Europe in obedience to the summons of some potentate whose life and throne depended upon my dexterity and knowledge.

In due course I entered a hospital, and followed the curriculum in the orthodox fashion. It was not, however, until I was approaching the end of my student days that I was burnt with that fire of enthusiasm which was destined in future days to come perilously near consuming me altogether. Among the students of my year was a man by whose side I had often worked — with whom I had occasionally exchanged a few words, but whose intimate I could not in any way have been said to be. In appearance he was a narrow-shouldered, cadaverous, lantern-jawed fellow, with dark, restless eyes, who boasted the name of Kelleran, and was popularly supposed to be an Irishman. As I discovered later, however, he was not an Irishman at all, but hailed from the Black Country — Wolverhampton, if I remember rightly, having the right to claim the honour of his birth. His father had been the senior partner in an exceedingly wealthy firm of hardware manufacturers, and while we had been in the habit of pitying and, in some instances I am afraid, of looking down upon the son on account of his supposed poverty, he was, in all probability, in a position to buy up every other man in the hospital twice over.

The average medical student is a being with whom the *world in general* has by this time been made fairly familiar. His frolics and capacity — or incapacity, as you may choose to term it — for work have been the subject of innumerable jests. If this be a true picture, then Kelleran was certainly different to the usual run of us. In his case the order was reversed: with him, work was play, and play was work; a jest was a thing unknown, and a practical joke a thing for which he allowed it to be seen that he had not the slightest tolerance.

I have already said that my father had amassed a competency. I must now add that up to a certain point he was a generous man, and for this reason my allowance, under different circumstances, would have been ample for my requirements. As ill luck would have it, however, I had got into the wrong set, and before I had been two years in the hospital was over head and ears in such a quagmire of debt and difficulties that it looked as if nothing but an absolute miracle could serve to extricate me. To my father I dared not apply: easy-going as he was on most matters, I had good reason to know that on the subject of debt he was inexorable. And yet to remain in my present condition was impossible. On every side tradesmen threatened me; my landlady's account had not been paid for weeks; while among the men of the hospital not one, but several, held my paper for sums lost at cards, the mere remembrance of which was sufficient to send a cold shiver coursing down my back every time I thought of them. From all this it will be surmised that my position was not only one of considerable difficulty but that it was also one of no little danger. Unless I could find a sum either to free myself, or at least to stave off my creditors, my career, as far as the world of medicine was concerned, might be considered at an end. Even now I can recall the horror of that period as vividly as if it were but yesterday.

It was on a Thursday, I remember, that the thunder-clap came. On returning to my rooms in the evening I discovered a letter awaiting me. With trembling fingers I tore open the envelope and drew out the contents. As I feared, it proved to be a demand from my most implacable creditor, a money-lender to whom I had been introduced by a fellow-student. The sum I had borrowed from him, with the assistance of a friend, was only a trifling one, but helped out by fines and other impositions it had increased to an amount which I was aware it was hopelessly impossible for me to pay. What was I to do? What could I do? Unless I settled the claim (to hope for mercy from the man himself was, to say the least of it, absurd), my friend, who, I happened to know, was himself none too well off at the moment, would be called upon to make it good. After

that how should I be able to face him or any one else again? I had not a single acquaintance in the world from whom I could borrow a sum that would be half sufficient to meet it, while I dared not go down to the country and tell my father of my folly and disgrace. In vain I ransacked my brains for a loophole of escape. Then the whistle of a steamer on the river attracted my attention, filling my brain with such thoughts as it had never entertained before, and I pray, by God's mercy, may never know again. Here was a way out of my difficulty, if only I had the pluck to try it. Strangely enough, the effect it had upon me was to brace me like a draught of rare wine. This was succeeded by a coldness so intense that both mind and body were rendered callous by it. How long it lasted I cannot say; it may have been only a few seconds — it may have been an hour before consciousness returned and I found myself still standing beside the table, holding the fatal letter in my hand. Like a drunken man I fumbled my way from the room into the hot night outside. What I was going to do I had no notion. I wanted to be alone, in some place away from the crowded pavements, if possible, where I could have time to think and to determine upon my course of action.

With a tempest of rage, against I knew not what or whom, in my heart, I hurried along, up one street and down another, until I found myself panting, but unappeased, upon the Embankment opposite the Temple Gardens. All round me was the bustle and life of the great city: cabs, containing men and women in evening dress, dashed along; girls and their lovers, talking in hushed voices, went by me arm in arm; even the loafers, leaning against the stone parapet, seemed happy in comparison with my wretched self. I looked down at the dark water gliding so pleasantly along below me, and remembered that all I had to do, as soon as I was alone, was to drop over the side, and be done with my difficulties for ever. Then in a flash the real meaning of what I proposed to do occurred to me.

"You coward," I hissed, with as much vehemence and horror as if I had been addressing a real enemy instead of myself, "to think of taking this way out of your difficulty! If you kill yourself, what will become of the other man? Go to him at once and tell him everything. He has the right to know."

The argument was irresistible, and I accordingly turned upon my heel and was about to start off in quest of the individual I wanted, when I found myself confronted with no less a person than Kelleran. He was walking quickly, and swung his cane as he did so. On seeing me he stopped.

"Douglas Ingleby!" he said: "well, this is fortunate! You are just the man I wanted."

I murmured something in reply, I forget what, and was about to pass on. I had bargained without my host, however. He had been watching me with his keen dark eyes, and when he made as if he would walk with me I was not altogether surprised.

"You do not object to my accompanying you I hope?" he inquired, by way of introducing what he had to say. "I've been wanting to have a talk with you for some days past."

"I'm afraid I'm in rather a hurry just now," I answered, quickening my pace a little as I did so.

"That makes no difference at all to me," he returned. "As I think you are aware, I am a fast walker. Since you are in a hurry, let us step out."

We did so, and for something like fifty yards proceeded at a brisk pace in perfect silence. His companionship was more than I could stand, and at last I stopped and faced him.

"What is it you want with me?" I asked angrily. "Cannot you see that I am not well to-night, and would rather be alone?"

"I can see you are not quite yourself," he answered quietly, still watching me with his grave eyes. "That is exactly why I want to walk with you. A little cheerful conversation will do you good. You don't know how clever I am at adapting my manner to other people's requirements. That is the secret of our profession, my dear Ingleby, as you will some day find out."

"I shall never find it out," I replied bitterly. "I have done with medicine. I shall clear out of England, I think — go abroad, try Australia or Canada — anywhere, I don't care where, to get out of this!"

"The very thing!" he returned cheerily, but without a trace of surprise. "You couldn't do better, I'm sure. You are strong, active, full of life and ambition; just the sort of fellow to make a good colonist. It must be a grand life, that hewing and hacking a place for oneself in a new country, watching and fostering the growth of a people that may some day take its place among the powers of the earth. Ah! I like the idea. It is grand! It makes one tingle to think of it."

He threw out his arms and squared his shoulders as if he were preparing for the struggle he had so graphically described. After that we did not walk quite so fast. The man had suddenly developed a strange fascination for me, and, as

he talked, I hung upon his words with a feverish interest I can scarcely account for now. By the time we reached my lodgings, I had put my trouble aside for the time being, but when I entered my sitting-room and found the envelope which had contained the fatal letter still lying upon the table, it all rushed back upon me, and with such force that I was well-nigh overwhelmed. Kelleran meanwhile had taken up his position on the hearthrug, whence he watched me with the same expression of contemplative interest upon his face to which I have before alluded.

"Hullo!" he said at last, after he had been some minutes in the house, and had had time to overhaul my meagre library, "what are these? Where did you pick them up?"

He had taken a book from the shelf, and was holding it tenderly in his hand. I recognised it as one of several volumes of a sixteenth-century work on Surgery that I had chanced upon on a bookstall in Holywell Street some months before. Its age and date had interested me, and I had bought it more out of curiosity than for any other reason. Kelleran, however, could scarcely withdraw his eyes from it.

"It's the very thing I've been wanting to make my set complete," he cried, when I had described my discovery of it. "Perhaps you don't know it, but I'm a perfect lunatic on the subject of old books. My own rooms, where, by the by, you have never been, are crammed from floor to ceiling, and still I go on buying. Let me see what else you have."

So saying, he continued his survey of the shelves, humming softly to himself as he did so, and pulling out such books as interested him, and heaping them upon the floor.

"You've the beginning of a by no means bad collection," he was kind enough to say, when he had finished. "Judging from what I see here, you must read a good deal more than most of our men."

"I'm afraid not," I answered. "The majority of these books were sent up to me from the country by my father, who thought they might be of service to me. A mistaken notion, for they take up a lot of room, and I've often wished them at Hanover."

"You have, have you? What a Goth you are!" he continued. "Well, then, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you want to get rid of them, I'll buy the lot, these old beauties included. They are really worth more than I can afford, but if you care about it, I'll make you a sporting offer of a hundred and fifty pounds for such as I've put upon the floor. What do you say?"

I could scarcely believe I heard aright. His offer was so preposterous, that I could have laughed in his face.

"My dear fellow," I cried, thinking for a moment that he must be joking with me, and feeling inclined to resent it, "what nonsense you talk! A hundred and fifty for the lot: why, they're not worth a ten-pound note, all told. The old fellows are certainly curious, but it is only fair that I should tell you that I gave five and sixpence for the set of seven volumes, complete."

"Then you got a bargain such as you'll never find again," he answered quietly. "I wish I could make as good an one every day. However, there's my offer. Take it or leave it as you please. I will give you one hundred and fifty pounds for those books, and take my chance of their value. If you are prepared to accept, I'll get a cab and take them away to-night. I've got my chequebook in my pocket, and can settle up for them on the spot."

"But, my dear Kelleran, how can you afford to give such —" Here I stopped abruptly. "I beg your pardon — I know I had no right to say such a thing."

"Don't mention it," he answered quietly. "I am not in the least offended, I assure you. I have always felt certain you fellows supposed me to be poor. As a matter of fact, however, I have the good fortune, or the ill, as I sometimes think, since it prevents my working as I should otherwise be forced to do, to be able to indulge myself to the top of my bent without fear of the consequences. But that has nothing to do with the subject at present under discussion. Will you take my price, and let me have the books, or not? I assure you I am all anxiety to get my nose inside one of those old covers before I sleep to-night."

Heaven knows I was eager enough to accept, and if you think for one moment you will see what his offer meant to me. With such a sum I could not only pay off the money-lender, but well-nigh put myself straight with the rest of my creditors. Yet all the time I had the uneasy feeling that the books were by no means worth the amount he had declared to be their value, and that he was only making me the offer out of kindness.

"If you are sure you mean it, I will accept," I said. "I am awfully hard up, and the money will be a godsend to me."

"I am rejoiced to hear it," he replied, "for in that case we shall be doing each other a mutual good turn. Now let's get them tied up. If you wouldn't mind seeing to that part of the business, I'll write the cheque and call the cab."

Ten minutes later he and his new possessions had taken their departure, and I was back once more in my room standing beside the table, just as I had done a few hours before, but with what a difference! Then I had seen no light ahead, nothing but complete darkness and dishonour; now I was a new man, and in a position to meet the majority of calls upon me. The change from the one condition to the other was more than I could bear, and when I remembered that less than sixty minutes before I was standing on that antechamber of death, the Embankment, contemplating suicide, I broke down completely, and sinking into a chair buried my face in my hands and cried like a child.

Next morning, as soon as the bank doors were open, I entered and cashed the cheque Kellaran had given me. Then, calling a cab, I made my way with a light heart, as you may suppose, to the office of the money-lender in question. His surprise at seeing me, and on learning the nature of my errand, may be better imagined than described. Having transacted my business with him, I was preparing to make my way back to the hospital, when an idea entered my head upon which I immediately acted. In something under ten minutes I stood in the bookseller's shop in Holy-well Street where I had purchased the volumes Kellaran had appeared to prize so much.

"Some weeks ago," I said to the man who came forward to serve me, "I purchased from you an old work on medicine entitled 'The Perfect Chi-surgeon, or The Art of Healing as practised in divers Ancient Countries.'"

"Seven volumes very much soiled — five and sixpence," returned the man immediately. "I remember the books."

"I'm glad of that," I answered. "Now, I want you to tell me what you would consider the real value of the work."

"If it were wanted to make up a collection it might possibly be worth a sovereign," the man replied promptly. "Otherwise, not more than we asked you for it."

"Then you don't think any one would be likely to offer a hundred pounds for it?" I inquired.

The man laughed outright.

"Not a man in the possession of his wits," he answered. "No, sir, I think I have stated the price very fairly, though of course it might fetch a few shillings more or less, according to circumstances."

"I am very much obliged to you," I said; "I simply wanted to know as a matter of curiosity."

With that I left the shop and made my way to the hospital, where I found Kellaran hard at work. He looked up at me as I entered, and nodded, but it was lunch time before I got an opportunity of speaking to him.

"Kellaran," I said, as we passed out through the great gates, "you deceived me about those books last night. They were not worth anything like the value you put upon them."

He looked me full and fair in the face, and I saw a faint smile flicker round the corners of his mouth.

"My dear Ingleby," he said, "what a funny fellow you are, to be sure! Surely if I choose to give you what I consider the worth of the books I am at perfect liberty to do so. If you are willing to accept it, no more need be said upon the subject. The value of a thing to a man is exactly what he cares to give for it, so I have always been led to believe."

"But I am convinced you did not give it because you wanted the books. You knew I was in straits and you took that form of helping me. It was generous of you indeed, Kellaran, and I'll never forget it as long as I live. You saved me from — but there, I cannot tell you. I dare not think of it myself. There is one thing I must ask of you. I want you to keep the books and to let the amount you gave me for them be a loan, which I will repay as soon as I possibly can."

I was aware that he was a passionate man: for I had once or twice seen him fly into a rage, but never into a greater one than now.

"Let it be what you please," he cried, turning from me. "Only for pity's sake drop the subject: I've had enough of it."

With this explosion he stalked away, leaving me standing looking after him, divided between gratitude and amazement.

I have narrated this incident for two reasons: firstly because it will furnish you with a notion of my own character, which I am prepared to admit exhibits but few good points; and in the second because it will serve to introduce to you a queer individual, now a very great person, whom I shall always regard as the Good Angel of my life, and, indirectly it is true, the bringer about of the one and only real happiness I have ever known.

From the time of the episode I have just described at such length to the present day, I can safely say I have never touched a card nor owed a man a penny-piece that I was not fully prepared to pay at a moment's notice. And with this assertion I must revert to the statement made at the commencement of this chapter — the saddest a man can make. As I

said then, there could be no doubt about it that I was a failure. For though I had improved in the particulars just stated, Fate was plainly against me. I worked hard and passed my examinations with comparative ease; yet it seemed to do me no good with those above me. The sacred fire of enthusiasm, which had at first been so conspicuously absent, had now taken complete hold of me; I studied night and day, grudging myself no labour, yet by some mischance everything I touched recoiled upon me, and, like the serpent of the fable, stung the hand that fostered it. Certainly I was not popular, and, since it was due almost directly to Kelloran's influence that I took to my work with such assiduity, it seems strange that I should also have to attribute my non-success to his agency. As a matter of fact, he was not a good leader to follow. From the very first he had shown himself to be a man of strange ideas. He was no follower or stickler for the orthodox; to sum him up in plainer words, he was what might be described as an experimentalist. In return, the authorities of the hospital looked somewhat askance upon him. Finally he passed out into the world, and the same term saw me appointed to the position of House Surgeon. Almost simultaneously my father died; and, to the horror of the family, an examination of his affairs proved that instead of being the wealthy man we had supposed him there was barely sufficient, when his liabilities were paid, to meet the expenses of his funeral. The shock of his death and the knowledge of the poverty to which she had been so suddenly reduced proved too much for my mother, and she followed him a few weeks later. Thus I was left, so far as I knew, without kith or kin in the world, with but few friends, no money, and the poorest possible prospects of ever making any.

To the circumstances under which I lost the position of House Surgeon I will not allude. Let it suffice that I *did* lose it, and that, although the authorities seemed to think otherwise, I am in a position to prove, whenever I desire to do so, that I was not the real culprit. The effect, however, was the same. I was disgraced beyond hope of redemption, and the proud career I had mapped out for myself was now beyond my reach for good and all.

Over the next twelve months it would perhaps be better that I should draw a veil. Even now I scarcely like to think of them. It is enough for me to say that for upwards of a month I remained in London, searching high and low for employment. This, however, was easier looked for than discovered. Try how I would, I could hear of nothing. Then, wearying of the struggle, I accepted an offer made me, and left England as surgeon on board an outward-bound passenger steamer for Australia.

Ill luck, however, still pursued me, for at the end of my second voyage the Company went into liquidation, and its vessels were sold. I shipped on board another boat in a similar capacity, made two voyages in her to the Cape, where on a friend's advice I bade her goodbye, and started for Ashanti as surgeon to an Inland Trading Company. While there I was wounded in the neck by a spear, was compelled to leave the Company's service, and eventually found myself back once more in London tramping the streets in search of employment. Fortunately, however, I had managed to save a small sum from my pay, so that I was not altogether destitute; but it was not long before this was exhausted, and then things looked blacker than they had ever done before. What to do I knew not. I had long since cast *my* pride to the winds, and was now prepared to take anything, no matter what. Then an idea struck me, and on it I acted.

Leaving my lodgings on the Surrey side of the river, I crossed Blackfriars Bridge, and made my way along the Embankment in a westerly direction. As I went I could not help contrasting my present appearance with that I had shown on the last occasion I had walked that way. Then I had been as spruce and neat as a man could well be; boasted a good coat to my back and a new hat upon my head. Now, however, the coat and hat, instead of speaking for my prosperity, as at one time they might have done, bore unmistakable evidence of the disastrous change which had taken place in my fortunes. Indeed, if the truth must be confessed, I was about as sorry a specimen of the professional man as could be found in the length and breadth of the Metropolis.

Reaching the thoroughfare in which I had heard that Kelloran had taken up his abode, I cast about me for a means of ascertaining his number. Compared with that in which I myself resided, this was a street of palaces, but it seemed to me I could read the characters of the various tenants in the appearance of each house-front. The particular one before which I was standing at the moment was frivolous in the extreme: the front door was artistically painted, an elaborate knocker ornamented the centre panel, while the windows were without exception curtained with dainty expensive stuffs. Everything pointed to the mistress being a lady of fashion; and having put one thing and another together, I felt convinced I should not find my friend there. The next I came to was a residence of more substantial type. Here everything was solid and plain, even to the borders of severity. If I could sum up the owner, he was a successful man, a lawyer for choice, a bachelor, and possibly, and even probably, a bigot on matters of religion. He would have two or three friends — not more — all of whom would be advanced in years, and, like himself, successful men of business. He would be able to appreciate a glass of dry sherry, and would have nothing to do with anything that did not bear the impress of a gilt-edged security. As neither of these houses seemed to suggest that they would be likely to know anything of the man I wanted, I made my way further down the street, looking about me as I proceeded. At last I came to a standstill before one that I was prepared to swear was inhabited by my old friend. His character was stamped unmistakably upon every inch of it: the untidy windows, the pile of books upon a table in the bow, the marks upon the front door where his impatient foot had often pressed while he turned his latchkey: all these spoke of Kelloran, and I was certain my instinct was not misleading me. Ascending the steps, I rang the bell. It was answered by a tall and somewhat austere woman of between forty and fifty years of age, upon whom a coquettish frilled apron and cap sat with incongruous effect. As I afterwards learnt, she had been Kelloran's nurse in bygone years, and since he had become a householder had taken charge of his domestic arrangements, and ruled both himself and his maidservants with a rod of iron.

“Would you be kind enough to inform me if Mr. Kelloran is at home?” I asked, after we had taken stock of each other.

“He has been abroad for more than three months,” the woman answered abruptly. Then, seeing the disappointment upon my face, she added, “I don't know when we may expect him home. He may be here on Saturday, and it's just possible we may not see him for two or three weeks to come. But perhaps you'll not mind telling me what your business with him

may be?"

"It is not very important," I answered humbly, feeling that my position was, to say the least of it, an invidious one. "I am an old friend, and I wanted to see him for a few minutes. Since, however, he is not at home, it does not matter, I assure you. I shall have other opportunities of communicating with him. At the same time, you might be kind enough to tell him I called."

"You'd better let me know your name first," she replied, with a look that suggested as plainly as any words could speak that she did not for an instant believe my assertion that I was a friend of her master's.

"My name is Ingleby," I said. "Mr. Kelloran will be sure to remember me. We were at the same hospital."

She gave a scornful sniff as if such a thing would be very unlikely, and then made as if she would shut the door in my face. I was not, however, to be put off in this fashion. Taking a card from my pocket, one of the last I possessed, I scrawled my name and present address upon it and handed it to her.

"Perhaps if you will show that to Mr. Kelloran he would not mind writing to me when he comes home," I said. "That is where I am living just now."

She glanced at the card, and, noting the locality, sniffed even more scornfully than before. It was evident that this was the only thing wanting to confirm the bad impression I had already created in her mind. For some seconds there was an ominous silence.

"Very well," she answered, at length, "I'll give it to him. But — why, Heaven save us! what's the matter? You're as white as a sheet. Why didn't you say you were feeling ill?"

I had been running it rather close for more than a week past, and the news that Kelloran, my last hope, was absent from England had unnerved me altogether. A sudden giddiness seized me, and I believe I should have fallen to the ground had I not clutched at the railings by my side. It was then that the real nature of the woman became apparent. Like a ministering angel she half led, half supported me into the house, and seated me on a chair in the somewhat sparsely furnished hall.

"Friend of the master, or no friend," I heard her say to herself, "I'll take the risk of it."

I heard no more, for my senses had left me. When they returned I found myself lying upon a sofa in Kelleran's study, the housekeeper standing by my side, and a maidservant casting sympathetic glances at me from the doorway.

"I'm afraid I have put you to a lot of trouble," I said, as soon as I had recovered myself sufficiently to speak. "I cannot think what made me go off like that. I have never done such a thing in my life before."

"You can't think?" queried the woman, with a curious intonation that was not lost upon me. "Then it's very plain you've not much wit about you. I think, young man, I could make a very good guess at the truth if I wanted to. However, let that be as it may, I'll put a bit of it right before you leave this house, or my name's not what it is." Then turning to the maid, who was still watching me, she continued sharply, "Be off about your business, miss, and do as I told you. Are you going to waste all the afternoon standing there staring about you like a baby?"

The girl tossed her head and disappeared, only to return a few minutes later with a tray, upon which was set out a substantial meal of cold meat.

On the old woman's ordering me to do so I sat down to it, and dined as I had not done for months past.

"There," she said, with an air of triumph as I finished, "that will make a new man of you." Then, having done all she could for me, and repenting, perhaps, of the leniency she had shown me, she returned to her former abrupt demeanour, and informed me, in terms there was no mistaking, that her time was valuable, and it behoved me to be off about my business as soon as possible. While she had been speaking, my eyes had travelled round the room until they lighted upon the mantelpiece (it was covered with pipes, books, photographs, and all the innumerable odds and ends that accumulate in a bachelor's apartment), where I discovered my own portrait with several others. I remembered having given it to Kelleran two years before. It was not a very good one, but with its assistance I proposed to establish my identity and prove to my stern benefactress that I was not altogether the impostor she believed me to be.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for all you have done," I said, as I rose and prepared to take my departure from the house. "At the same time I am very much afraid you do not altogether believe that I am the friend of your master's that I pretend to be."

"Tut, tut!" she answered. "If I were in your place I'd say no more about that. Least said soonest mended, is my motto. I trust, however, I'm a Christian woman, and do my best to help folk in distress. But I've warned ye already that I've eyes in my head and wit enough to tell what's o'clock just as well as my neighbours. Why, bless my soul, you don't think I've been all my years in the world without knowing what's what, or who's who?"

She paused as if for breath; and, embracing the opportunity, I crossed the room and took from the chimneypiece the photograph to which I have just alluded.

"Possibly this may help to reassure you," I said, as I placed it before her. "I do not think I have changed so much, since it was taken, that you should fail to recognise me."

She picked up the photo and looked at it, reading the signature at the bottom with a puzzled face.

"Heaven save us, so it *is*!" she cried, when the meaning of it dawned upon her. "You are Mr. Ingleby, after all? Well, I am a softy, to be sure. I thought you were trying to take me in. So many people come here asking to see him, saying they were at the hospital with him that you've got to be more than careful. If I'd have thought it really was you, I'd have bitten my tongue out before I'd have said what I did. Why, sir, the master talks of you to this day: it's Ingleby this, and Ingleby that, from morning till night. Many's the time he's made inquiries from gentlemen who've been here, in the hopes of finding out what has become of ye."

“God bless him!” I said, my heart warming at the news that he had not forgotten me. “We were the best of friends once.”

“But, Mr. Ingleby,” continued the old woman after a pause, “if you’ll allow me to say so, I don’t like to see you like this. You must have seen a lot of trouble, sir, to have got in such a state.”

“The world has not treated me very kindly,” I answered, with an attempt at a smile, “but I’ll tell Kelloran all about it when I see him. You think it is possible he may be home on Saturday?”

“I hope so, sir, I’m sure,” she replied. “You may be certain I’ll give him your address, and tell him you’ve called, the moment I see him.”

I thanked her again for her trouble, and took my departure, feeling a very different man as I went down the steps and turned my face citywards. In my own heart I felt certain Kelloran would do something to help me. Had I known, however, what that something was destined to be, I wonder whether I should have awaited his coming with such eagerness.

As it transpired, it was on the Friday following my call at his house that, on returning to my lodgings after another day’s fruitless search for employment, I found the following letter awaiting me. The handwriting was as familiar to me as my own, and it may be imagined with what eagerness I tore open the envelope and scanned the contents. It ran:

“MY DEAR INGLEBY,

“It was a pleasant welcome home to find that you are in England once more. I am sorry, however, to learn from my housekeeper that affairs have not been prospering with you. This must be remedied, and at once. I flatter myself I am just the man to do it. It is possible you may consider me unfeeling when I say that there never was such luck as your being in want of employment at this particular moment. I’ve a billet standing ready and waiting for you; one of the very sort you are fitted for, and one that you will enjoy, unless you have lost your former tastes and inclinations. You have never met Dr. Nikola, but you must do so without delay. I tell you, Ingleby, he is the most wonderful man with whom I have ever been brought in contact. We chanced upon each other in St. Petersburg three months ago, and since then he’s fascinated me as no other man has ever done. I have spoken of you to him, and in consequence he dines with me to-night in the hope of meeting you. Whatever else you do, therefore, do not fail to put in an appearance. You cannot guess the magnitude of the experiment upon which he is at work. At first glance, and in any other man, it would seem incredible, impossible, I might

almost say absurd. When, however, you have seen him, I venture to think you will not doubt that he will carry it through. Let me count upon you to-night, then, at seven.

“Always your friend,

“Andrew Fairfax Kellaran.”

I read the letter again. What did it mean? At any rate, it contained a ray of hope. It would have to be a very curious billet, I told myself, under present circumstances, that I would refuse. But who was this extraordinary individual, Dr Nikola, who seemed to have exercised such a fascination over my enthusiastic friend? Well, that I had to find out for myself.



CHAPTER 48. A NEW IMPETUS

THE clocks in the neighbourhood had scarcely ceased striking as I ascended the steps of Kelleran's house and rang the bell. Even had he not been so impressive in his invitation there was small likelihood of my forgetting the appointment I had been waiting for it, hour by hour, with an impatience that can only be understood when I say that each one was bringing me nearer the only satisfying meal I had had since I last visited his abode.

The door was opened to me by the same faithful housekeeper who had proved herself such a ministering angel on the previous occasion. She greeted me as an old friend, but with a greater respect than she had shown when we had last talked together. This did not prevent her, however, from casting a scrutinising eye over me, as much as to say, "You look a bit more respectable, my lad, but your coat is very faded at the seams, your collar is frayed at the edge, and you sniff the smell of dinner as if you have not had a decent meal for longer than you care to think about"; all of which, had she put it into so many words, would have been perfectly true.

"Step inside," she said; "Mr. Kelleran's waiting for you in the study, I know." Then sinking her voice to a whisper she added: "There's duck and green peas for dinner, and as soon as the other gentleman arrives I shall tell cook to dish. He'll not be long now."

What answer I should have returned I cannot say, but as she finished speaking a door farther down the passage opened, and my old friend made his appearance, with the same impetuosity that always characterised him.

"Ingleby, my dear fellow," he cried, as he ran with outstretched hand to greet me, "I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you again. It seems years since I last set eyes on you. Come in here; I want to have a good look at you. We've hundreds of things to say to each other, and heaps of questions to ask, haven't we? And, by Jove, we must look sharp about it too, for in a few minutes Nikola will be here. I asked him to come at a quarter past seven, in order that we might have a little time alone together first."

So saying, he led me into his study, the same in which I had returned to my senses after my fainting fit a few days before, and when he had done so he bade me seat myself in an easy chair.

"You can't think how good it is to see you again, Kelleran," I said, as soon as I could get in a word. "I had begun to think myself forgotten by all my friends."

"Bosh!" was his uncompromising reply. "Talk about your friends — why, you never know who they are till you're in trouble! At least, that's what I think. And, by the way, let me tell you that you *do* look a bit pulled down. I wonder what idiocy you've been up to since I saw you last. Tell me about it. You won't smoke a cigarette before dinner? Very good! now fire away!"

Thus encouraged, I told him in a few words all that had befallen me since we had last met. While I was talking he stood before me, his face lit up with interest, and to all intents and purposes as absorbed in my story as if it had been his own.

"Well, well, thank goodness it is all over now," he said, when I had brought my tale to a conclusion. "I think I've found you a billet that will suit you admirably, and if you play your cards well there's no saying to what it may not lead. Nikola is the most marvellous man in the world, as you will admit when you have seen him. I, for one, have never met anybody like him; and as for this new scheme of his, why, if he brings it off, I give you my word it will revolutionise Science."

I was too well acquainted with my friend's enthusiastic way of talking to be surprised at it; at the same time I was thoroughly conversant with his cleverness, and for this reason I was prepared to believe that, if he thought well of any scheme, there must be something out of the common in it.

"But what is this wonderful idea?" I asked, scarcely able to contain my longing, as the fumes of dinner penetrated to us from the regions below. "And how am I affected by it?"

"That I must leave for Dr. Nikola to tell you himself," Kelleran replied. "Let it suffice for the moment that I envy you your opportunity. I believe if I had been able to avail myself of the chance he offered me of going into it with him, I should have been compelled to sacrifice you. But there, you will hear all about it in good time, for if I am not mistaken that is his cab drawing up outside now. It is one of his peculiarities to be always punctual to the moment. What do you make the right time by your watch?"

I was obliged to confess that I possessed no watch. It had been turned into the necessities of existence long since. Kelleran must have realised what was passing in my mind, though he pretended not to have noticed it; at any rate he said, "I make it a quarter past seven to the minute, and I am prepared to wager that's our man."

A bell rang, and almost before the sound of it had died away the study door opened, and the housekeeper, with a look of awe upon her face which had not been there when she addressed me, announced "Dr. Nikola."

Looking back on it now, I find that, in spite of all that has happened since, my impressions of that moment are as fresh and clear as if it were but yesterday. I can see the tall, lithe figure of this extraordinary man, his sallow face, and his piercing black eyes steadfastly regarding me, as if he were trying to determine whether or not I was capable of assisting him in the work upon which he was so exhaustively engaged. Never before had I seen such eyes; they seemed to look me through and through, and to read my inmost thoughts.

"This gentleman, my dear Kelleran," he began, after they had shaken hands, and without waiting for me to be introduced to him, "should be your friend Ingleby, of whom you have so often spoken to me. How do you do, Mr. Ingleby? I don't think there is much doubt but that we shall work admirably together. You have lately been in Ashanti, I perceive."

I admitted that I had, and went on to inquire how he had become aware of it; for as Kelleran had not known it until a few minutes before, I did not see how he could be acquainted with the fact.

"It is not a very difficult thing to tell," he answered, with a smile at my astonishment, "seeing that you carry about with you the mark of a Gwato spear. If it were necessary I could tell you some more things that would surprise you: for instance, I could tell you that the man who cut the said spear out for you was an amateur at his work, that he was left-handed, that he was short-sighted, and that he was recovering from malaria at the time. All this is plain to the eye; but I see our friend Kelleran fancies his dinner is getting cold, so we had better postpone our investigations for a more convenient opportunity."

We accordingly left the study and proceeded to the dining-room. All day long I had been looking forward to that moment with the eagerness of a starving man, yet when it arrived I scarcely touched anything. If the truth must be confessed, there was something about this man that made me forget such mundane matters as mere eating and drinking. And I noticed that Nikola himself was even more abstemious. For this reason, save for the fact that he himself enjoyed it, the bountiful spread Kelleran had arranged for us was completely wasted.

During the progress of the meal no mention was made of the great experiment upon which our host had informed me Nikola was engaged. Our conversation was mainly devoted to travel. Nikola, I soon discovered, had been everywhere, and had seen everything. There appeared to be no place on the face of the habitable globe with which he was not acquainted, and of which he could not speak with the authority of an old resident. China, India, Australia, South America, North, South, East, and West Africa, were as familiar to him as Piccadilly, and it was in connection with one of the last-named Continents that a curious incident occurred.

We had been discussing various cases of catalepsy; and to illustrate an argument he was adducing, Kelleran narrated a curious instance of lethargy with which he had become acquainted in Southern Russia. While he was speaking I noticed that Nikola's face wore an expression that was partly one of derision and partly of amusement.

"I think I can furnish you with an instance that is even more extraordinary," I said, when our host had finished; and as I did so, Nikola leaned a little towards me. "In fairness to your argument, however, Kelleran, I must admit that while it comes under the same category, the malady in question confines itself almost exclusively to the black races on the West Coast of Africa."

"You refer to the Sleeping Sickness, I presume?" said Nikola, whose eyes were fixed upon me, and who was paying the greatest attention to all I said.

"Exactly — the Sleeping Sickness," I answered. "I was fortunate enough to see several instances of it when I was on the West Coast, though the one to which I am referring did not come before me personally, but was described to me by a man, a rather curious character, who happened to be in the district at the time. The negro in question, a fine healthy fellow of about twenty years of age, was servant to a Portuguese trader at Cape Coast Castle. He had been up country on some trading expedition or other, and during the whole time had enjoyed the very best of health. For the first few days after his return to the coast, however, he was unusually depressed. Slight swelling of the cervical glands set in, accompanied by a tendency to fall asleep at any time. This somnolency gradually increased; cutaneous stimulation was tried, at first with

comparative success; the symptoms, however, soon recurred, the periods of sleep became longer and more frequent, until at last the patient could scarcely have been said to be ever awake. The case, so my informant said, was an extremely interesting one."

"But what was the result?" inquired Kelleran, a little impatiently. "You have not told us to what all this is leading."

"Well, the result was that in due course the patient became extremely emaciated — a perfect skeleton, in fact. He would take no food, answered no questions, and did not open his eyes from morning till night. To make a long story short, just as my informant was beginning to think that the end was approaching, there appeared in Cape Coast Castle a mysterious stranger who put forward claims to a knowledge of medicine. He forgathered with my man, and after a while obtained permission to try his hand upon the negro."

"And killed him at once, of course?"

"Nothing of the sort. The result was one that you will scarcely credit. The whole business was most irregular, I believe, but my friend was not likely to worry himself much about that. This new man had his own pharmacopoeia — a collection of essences in small bottles, more like what they used in the Middle Ages than anything else, I should imagine. Having obtained possession of the patient, he carried him away to a hut outside the town and took him in hand there and then."

"The man who told me about it, and who, I should have said, had had a good experience of the disease, assured me that he was as certain as any one possibly could be that the chap could not live out the week; and yet when the new-comer, ten days later, invited him to visit the hut, there was the man acting as his servant, waiting at table, if you please, and to all intents and purposes, though very thin, as well as ever he had been in his life."

"But, my dear fellow," protested Kelleran, "Guerin says that out of the 148 cases that came under his notice 148 died."

"I can't help what Guerin says," I answered, a little warmly I am afraid. "I am only telling you what my friend told me. He gave me his word of honour that the result was as he described. The strangest part of the whole business, however, has yet to be told. It appears that the man had not only cured the fellow, but that he had the power of returning him to the condition in which he found him, at will. It wasn't hypnotism, but what it was is more that I can say. My informant described it to me as being about the uncanniest performance he had ever witnessed."

"In what way?" asked Kelleran. "Furnish us with a more detailed account. There was a time when you were a famous hand at a diagnosis."

"I would willingly do so," I answered; "unfortunately, however, I can't remember it all. It appears that he was always saying the most mysterious things and putting the strangest questions. On one occasion he asked my friend, as they were standing by the negro's bedside, if there was any one whose image he would care to see? Merton at first thought he was making fun of him, but seeing that he was in earnest he considered for a moment, and eventually answered that he would very much like to see the portrait of an old shipmate who had perished at sea some six or seven years prior to his arrival on the West Coast. As soon as he had said this the man stooped over the bed and opened the sleeping nigger's eyes. 'Examine the retina, he said, and I think you will see what you want.' My friend looked."

"With what result?" inquired Kelleran. Nikola said nothing, but smiled, as I thought, a trifle sceptically.

"It seems an absurd thing to say, I know," I continued, "but he swore to me that he had before him the exact picture of the man he had referred to; and what is more, standing on the deck of the steamer just as he had last seen him. It was as clear and distinct as if it had been a photograph."

"And all the time the negro was asleep?"

"Fast asleep!" I answered.

"I should very much like to meet your friend," said Kelleran emphatically. "A man with an imagination like that must be an exceedingly interesting companion. But seriously, my dear Ingleby, you don't mean to say you wish us to believe that all this really happened?"

"I am telling you what he told me," I answered. "I cannot swear to the truth of it, of course, but I will go so far as to say that I do not think he was intentionally deceiving me."

Kelleran shrugged his shoulders incredulously, and for some moments an uncomfortable silence ensued. This was broken by Nikola.

"My dear Kelleran," he said, "I don't think you are altogether fair to our friend Ingleby. As he admits, he was only

speaking on hearsay, and under these circumstances he might very easily have been deceived. Fortunately, however, for the sake of his reputation I am in a position to corroborate all he has said."

"The deuce you are!" cried Kelloran; while I was too much astonished to speak, and could only stare at him in complete surprise. "What on earth do you mean? Pray explain."

"I can only do so by saying that I was the man who did this apparently wonderful thing."

Kelloran and I continued to stare at him in amazement. It was too absurd. Could he be laughing at us? And yet his face was serious enough.

"You do not seem to credit my assertion," said Nikola, quietly. "And yet I assure you it is correct. I was the mysterious individual who appeared in Cape Coast Castle, who brought with him his own pharmacopoeia, and who wrought the miracle which your friend appears to have considered so wonderful."

"The coincidence is too extraordinary," I answered, as if in protest.

"Coincidences are necessarily extraordinary," Nikola replied. "I do not see that this one is more so than usual."

"And the miracle?"

"Was in reality no miracle at all," he answered; "it was merely the logical outcome of a perfectly natural process. Pray do not look so incredulous. I am aware that my statement is difficult to believe, but I assure you, my dear Ingleby, that it is quite true. However, proof is always better than mere assertion, so, since you are still sceptical, let me make my position right with you. For reasons that will be self-evident I cannot produce the effect in a negro's eye, but I can do so in a way that will strike you as being scarcely less extraordinary. If you will draw up your chairs I will endeavour to explain."

Needless to remark, we did as he desired; and when we were seated on either side of him waited for the manifestation he had promised us.

Taking a small silver box, but little larger than a card-case, from his pocket, he opened it and tipped what might have been a teaspoonful of black powder into the centre of a dessert plate. I watched it closely, in the hope of being able to discover of what it was composed. My efforts, however, were unavailing. It was black, as I have already said, and from a distance resembled powdered charcoal. This, however, it could not have been, by reason of its strange liquidity, which was as great as that of quicksilver, and which only came into operation when it had been exposed to the air for some minutes. Hither and thither the stuff ran about the dish, and I noticed that as it did so it gradually lost its original sombre hue and took to itself a variety of colours that were as brilliant as the component tints of the spectrum. These scintillated and quivered till the eyes were almost blinded by their radiance, and yet they riveted the attention in such a manner that it was well-nigh, if not quite, impossible to look away or to think of anything else. In vain I tried to calm myself, in order that I might be a cool and collected observer of what was taking place. Whether there was any perfume thrown off by the stuff upon the plate I cannot say, but as I watched it my head began to swim and my eyelids felt as heavy as lead. That this was not fancy upon my part is borne out by the fact that Kelloran afterwards confessed to me that he experienced exactly the same sensations. Nikola, however, was still manipulating the dish, turning it this way and that, as if he were anxious to produce as many varieties of colour as possible in a given time. It must have been upwards of five minutes before he spoke. As he did so he gave the plate an extra tilt, so that the mixture ran down to one side. It was now a deep purple in colour.

"I think if you will look into the centre of the fluid you will see something that will go a long way towards convincing you of the truth of the assertion I made just now," he said quietly, but without turning his head to look at me.

I looked as he desired, but at first could see nothing save the mixture itself, which was fast turning from purple to blue. This blue grew gradually paler; and as I watched, to my astonishment, a picture formed itself before my eyes. I saw a long wooden house, surrounded on all sides by a deep verandah. The latter was covered with a beautiful flowering creeper. On either side of the dwelling was a grove of palms, and to the right, showing like a pool of dazzling quicksilver between the trees, was the sea. And pervading everything was the sensation of intense heat. At first glance I could not recall the house, but it was not long before I recognised the residence of the man who had told me the story which had occasioned this looked at it again, and could even see the window of the room in which I had recovered from my first severe attack of fever, and from which I never thought to have emerged alive. With the sight of it the recollection of that miserable time came back to me, and Kelloran and even his friend Nikola were, for the moment, forgotten.

"From the expression upon your face I gather that you know the place," said Nikola, after I had been watching it for a few moments. "Now look into the verandah, and tell me if you recognise the two men you see seated there."

I looked again, and saw that one was myself, while the other, the man who was leaning against the verandah rail smoking a cigar, was the owner of the house itself. There could be no mistake about it. The whole scene was as plain before my eyes as if it had been a photograph taken on the spot.

"There," said Nikola, with a little note of triumph in his voice, "I hope that will convince you that when I say I can do a thing, I mean it"

So saying he tilted the saucer, and the picture vanished in a whirl of colour. I tried to protest, but before I had time to say anything the liquid had in some strange fashion resolved itself once more into a powder, Nikola had tipped it back into the silver box, and Kelleran and I were left to put the best explanation we could upon it. We looked at each other, and, feeling that I could not make head or tail of what I had seen, I waited for him to speak.

"I never saw such a thing in my life," he cried, when he had found sufficient voice. "If any one had told me that such a thing was possible I would not have believed him. I can scarcely credit the evidence of my senses now."

"In fact, you feel towards the little exhibition I have just given you very much as you did to Ingleby's story a quarter of an hour ago," said Nikola. "What a doubting world it is, to be sure! The same world which ridiculed the notion that there could be anything in vaccination, in the steam engine, in chloroform, the telegraph, the telephone, or the phonograph. For how many years has it scoffed at the power of hypnotism! How many of our cleverest scientists fifty years ago could have foretold the discovery of argon, or the possibility of being able to telegraph without the aid of wires? And because the little world of to-day knows these things and has survived the wonder of them, it is convinced it has attained the end of wisdom. The folly of it! To-night I have shown you something for which less than a hundred years ago I should have been stoned as a wizard. At my death the secret will be given to the world, and the world, when it has recovered from its astonishment, will say, 'How very simple! why did no one discover it before?' I tell you, gentlemen," Nikola continued, rising and standing before the fireplace, "that we three, to-night, are standing on the threshold of a discovery which will shake the world to its foundations."

When he had moved, Kelleran and I had also pushed back our chairs from the table, and were now watching him as if turned to stone. The sacred fire of enthusiasm, which I thought had left me for ever, was once more kindling in my breast, and I hung upon his words as if I were afraid I might lose even a breath that escaped his lips. As for Nikola himself, his usually pallid face was aglow with excitement.

"The story is as old as the hills," he began. "Ever since the days when our first parents trod the earth there have been men who have aimed at discovering a means of lengthening the span of life. From the very infancy of science, the wisest and cleverest have devoted their lives to the study of the human body, in the hope of mastering its secret. Assisting in the search for that particular something which was to revolutionise the world, we find Zosimus the Theban, the Jewess Maria, the Arabian Geber, Hermes Trismegistus, Linnaeus, Berzelius, Cuvier, Raymond Lully, Paracelsus, Roger Bacon, De Lisle, Albertus Magnus, and even Dr. Price. Each in his turn quarried in the mountain of Wisdom, and died having failed to discover the hidden treasure for which he sought. And why? Because, egotistical as it may seem on my part to say so, they did not seek in the right place. They commenced at the wrong point, and worked from it in the wrong direction. But if they failed to find what they wanted, they at least rendered good service to those who were to follow after, for from every failure something new was learned. For my part I have studied the subject in every form, in every detail. For more years than I can tell you, I have lived for it, dreamed of it, fought for it, and overcome obstacles of the very existence of which no man could dream. The work of my predecessors is known to me; I have studied their writings, and tested their experiments to the last particular. All the knowledge that modern science has accumulated I have acquired. The magic of the East I have explored and tested to the uttermost. Three years ago I visited Thibet under extraordinary circumstances. There, in a certain place, inaccessible to the ordinary man, and at the risk of my own life and that of the brave man who accompanied me, I obtained the information which was destined to prove the coping-stone of the great discovery I have since made. Only two things were wanting then to . . . complete the whole and to enable me to get to work. One of these I had just found in St. Petersburg when I first met you, Kelleran; the other I discovered three weeks ago. It has been a long and tedious search, but such labour only makes success the sweeter. The machinery is now prepared; all that remains is to fit the various parts together. In six months' time, if all goes well, I will have a man walking upon this earth who, under certain conditions, shall live a thousand years."

I could scarcely believe that I heard aright. Was the man deliberately asking us to believe that he had really found the way to prolong human life indefinitely? It sounded very much like it, and yet this was the Nineteenth Century and . . . But

at this point I ceased my speculations. Had I not, only that evening, witnessed an exhibition of his marvellous powers? If he had penetrated so far into the Unknowable — at least what we considered the unknowable — as to be able to work such a miracle, why should we doubt that he could carry out what he was now professing to be able to do?

“And when shall we be permitted to hear the result of your labours?” asked Kelleran with a humility that was surprising in a man usually so self-assertive.

“Who can say?” asked Nikola. “These things are more or less dependent on Time. It may be only a short period before I am ready; on the other hand a lifetime may elapse. The process is above all a gradual one, and to hurry it might be to spoil everything. And now, my dear Kelleran, with your permission I will bid you good-night. I leave for the North at daybreak, and I have much to do before I go. If I am not taking you away too soon, Ingleby, perhaps you would not mind walking a short distance with me. I have a good deal to say to you.”

“I shall be very pleased,” I answered; and the look that Kelleran gave me showed me that he considered my decision a wise one.

“In that case come along,” said Nikola. “Good-night, Kelleran, and many thanks for the introduction you have given me. I feel quite sure Ingleby and I will get on admirably together.”

He shook hands with Kelleran, and passed into the hall, leaving me alone with the man who had proved my benefactor for the second time in my life.

“Good-night, old fellow,” I said, as I shook him by the hand. “I cannot thank you sufficiently for your goodness in putting me in the way of this billet. It has given me another chance, and I shan’t forget your kindness as long as I live.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Kelleran answered. “You take things too seriously. I feel sure the advantage is as much Nikola’s as yours. He’s a wonderful man, and you’re the very fellow he requires: between you, you ought to be able to bring about something that will upset the calculations of certain pompous old fossils of our acquaintance. Good-night, and good luck to you!”

So saying, he let us out by the front door, and stood upon the doorstep watching us as we walked down the street. It was an exquisite night. The moon was almost at the full, and her mellow rays made the street almost as light as day. My companion and I walked for some distance in silence. He did not speak, and I already entertained too much respect for him to interrupt his reverie. More than once I glanced at his tall, graceful figure, and the admirably shaped head, which seemed such a fitting case for the extraordinary brain within.

“As I said just now,” he began at length, as if he were continuing a conversation which had been suddenly interrupted, “I leave at daybreak for the North of England. For the purposes of the experiment I am about to make, it is vitally necessary that I should possess a residence far removed from other people, where I should not run any risk of being disturbed. For this reason I have purchased Allerdeyne Castle, in Northumberland, a fine old place overlooking the North Sea. It is by no means an easy spot to get at, and should suit my purposes admirably. I shall not see you before I go, so that whatever I have to say had better be said at once. To begin with, I presume you have made up your mind to assist me in the work I am about to undertake?”

“If you consider me competent,” I answered, “I shall be only too glad to do so.”

“Kelleran has assured me that I could not have a better assistant,” he replied, “and I am willing to take you upon his recommendation. If you have no objection to bring forward, we may as well consider the matter settled. Have you any idea as to the remuneration you will require?”

I answered that I had not, and that I would leave it to him to give me whatever he considered fair. In reply he named a sum that almost took my breath away. I remarked that I should be satisfied with half the amount, whereupon he laughed good-humouredly.

“I’m afraid we’re neither of us good business men,” he said. “By all the laws of trade, on finding that I offered you more than you expected, you should have stood out for twice as much. Still, I like you all the better for your modesty. Now my road turns off here, and I will bid you good-night. In an hour I will send my servant to you with a letter containing full instructions. I need scarcely say that I am sure you will carry them out to the letter.”

“I will do so, come what may,” I answered seriously.

“Then good-night,” he said, and held out his hand to me. “All being well, we shall meet again in two or three days.”

“Good-night,” I replied.

Then, with a wave of his hand to me, he sprang into a hansom which he had called up to the pavement, gave the direction to the driver, and a moment later was round the corner and out of sight. After he had gone, I continued my homeward journey.

I had not been in the house an hour before I was informed that some one was at the door desiring to see me. I accordingly hurried downstairs, to find myself face to face with the most extraordinary individual I have ever seen in my life. At first glance I scarcely knew what to make of him, but when the light from the hall lamp fell upon his face, I saw that he was a Chinaman, and the ugliest I have ever seen in all my experience of the Mongolian race. His eyes squinted terribly, and a portion of his nose was missing. It was the sort of face one sees in a nightmare, and, accustomed as I was by my profession to horrible sights, I must admit my gorge rose at him. At first it did not occur to me to connect him with Nikola.

“Do you want to see me?” I inquired, in some astonishment.

He nodded his head, but did not speak. “What is it about?” I continued. He uttered a peculiar grunt, and produced a letter and a small box from his pocket, both of which he handed to me. I understood immediately from whom he came. Signing to him to remain where he was until I could tell him whether there was an answer, I turned into the house and opened the letter. Having read it, I returned to the front door.

“You can tell Dr. Nikola that I will be sure to attend to it,” I said. “You savee?”

He nodded his head, and next moment was on his way down the street. When he was out of sight I returned to my bedroom, and, lighting the gas, once more perused the communication I had received. As I did so a piece of paper fell from between the leaves. I picked it up, to discover that it was a cheque for one hundred pounds payable to myself. The letter ran:

“My dear Ingleby,

“According to the promise I made you this evening, I am sending you herewith by my Chinese servant, your instructions, as clearly worked out as I can make them. To begin with, I want you to remain in town until Monday next. On the morning of that day, if all goes well, you will be advised by the agent of the Company in London of the arrival in the river of the steamship *Dona Mercedes*, bound from Cadiz to Newcastle. On receipt of that information you will be good enough to board her and to inquire for Don Miguel de Moreno and his great-granddaughter, who are passengers by the boat to England. I have already arranged with the Company for your passage, so you need have no anxiety upon that score.

“You will find the Don a very old man, and I beg that you will take the greatest possible care of him. For this reason I have sent you the accompanying drugs, each of which is labelled with the fullest instructions. They should not be made use of unless occasion absolutely requires.”

(Here followed a list of the various symptoms for which I was to watch, and an exhaustive *resume* of the treatment I was to employ in the event of certain contingencies arising.)

“On the arrival of the vessel in Newcastle”— the letter continued —“I will communicate with you again. In the meantime I send you what I think will serve to pay your expenses until we meet.

“Believe me,

“Your sincere friend,

“Nikola.”

“P.S. — One last word of warning. Should you by any chance be brought into contact with a certain Mongolian of very sinister appearance, with half an ear missing, have nothing whatsoever to do with him. Keep out of his way, and above all let him know nothing of your connection with myself. This, I beg you to believe, is no idle warning, for all our lives depend upon it.”

Having thoroughly mastered the contents of this curious epistle, I turned my attention to the parcel which accompanied it. This I discovered was made up of a number of small packets evidently containing powders, and two-ounce phials of some tasteless and scentless liquid, to which I was quite unable to assign a name.

Once more I glanced at the letter, in order to make sure of the name of the man whose guardian I was destined for the future to be. De Moreno was the name, and it was his granddaughter who was accompanying him. In an idle, dreamy way, I wondered what the latter would prove to be like. For some reason or another I found myself thinking a good deal of her,

and when I fell asleep that night it was to dream that she was standing before me with outstretched hands, imploring me to save her not only from a certain one-eared Chinaman, but also from Nikola himself.



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CHAPTER 49. THE MYSTERIOUS CHINAMAN

AFTER my meeting with Nikola at Kelleran's house, it was a new prospect that life opened up for me. I confronted the future with a smiling face, and no longer told myself, as I had done so often of late, that Failure and I were inseparable companions, and for any success I might hope to achieve in the world I had better be out of it. On the contrary, when I retired to rest after the receipt of Nikola's letter, as narrated in the preceding chapter, it was with a happier heart than I had known for more than two years past, and a fixed determination that, happen what might, even if his wonderful experiment came to naught, my new employer should not find me lacking in desire to serve him. As for that experiment itself, I scarcely knew what to think of it. To a man who had studied the human frame, its wonderful mechanism combined with its many deficiencies and limitations, it seemed impossible it could succeed. And yet, strange as it may appear to say so, there was something about Nikola that made one feel sure he would not embark upon such an undertaking if he were not quite certain, or at least had not a well-grounded hope, of being able to bring it to a favourable issue. However, successful or unsuccessful, the fact remained that I was to be associated with him, and the very thought of such co-operation was sufficient to send the blood tingling through my veins with new life and strength.

During the two days that elapsed between my meeting with Nikola and the arrival of the vessel for which he had told me to be on the look-out, I saw nothing of Kelleran. I was not idle, however. In the first place it was necessary for me to replenish my wardrobe, which, as I have already observed, stood in need of considerable additions, and in the second I was anxious to consult some books of reference to which Nikola had directed my attention. By the time I had done these things, I had not, as may be supposed, very much leisure left, either for paying visits or for receiving them. I was careful, however, to write thanking him for the good turn he had done me, and wishing him good-bye in case I did not see him before I left.

It was between eight and nine o'clock on the Monday morning following that I received a note from the Steamship Company, to which Nikola had referred, advising me that their vessel the *Dona Mercedes* had arrived from Cadiz and was

now lying in the river, and would sail for the North at eleven o'clock precisely. Accordingly I gathered my luggage together, what there was of it, and made my way down to her. As Nikola had predicted, I found her lying in the Pool.

On boarding her I was confronted by a big, burly man with a long brown beard, which blew over either shoulder and met behind his head as if it were some new kind of comforter. I inquired for the skipper.

"I am the captain," he answered. "And I suppose you are Dr. Ingleby. I had a letter from the owners saying you were going North with us. You may be sure we'll do our best to make you comfortable. In the meantime the steward will show you your berth and look after your luggage."

As he said this he beckoned a hand aft and sent him below in search of the official in question.

"I think you have a lady and gentleman on board who are expecting me?" I remarked, after the momentary pause which followed the man's departure.

"That I have, sir," he answered with emphasis; "and a nice responsibility they've been for me. I wouldn't undertake another like it if I were paid a hundred pounds extra for my trouble. But perhaps you know the old gentleman?"

"I have never seen him in my life," I replied, "but I have to take charge of him until we get to the North."

"Then I wish you joy of your work," he continued. "You'll have your time pretty fully occupied, I can tell you."

"In what way?" I inquired. "I shall consider it a favour if you will tell me all you can about him. Is the old gentleman eccentric, or what is the matter with him?"

"Eccentric?" replied the skipper, rolling his tongue round the word as if he liked its flavour, "Well, he may be that for all I know, but it's not his eccentricity that gives the trouble. It's his age! Why, I'll be bound he's a hundred, if he's a day. He's not a man at all, only a bag of bones; can't move out of his berth, can't walk, can't talk, and can't do a single hand's turn to help himself. His bones are almost through his skin, his eyes are sunk so far into his head that you can only guess what they're like, and when he wants a meal, or when he's got to have one, I should say, for he's past *wanting* anything, why, I'm blest if he hasn't to be fed with pap like a baby. It's a pitiful sort of a plight for a man to come to. What do you think? He'd far better be dead and buried."

I thought I understood. Putting one thing and another together, the reason of the old man's journey North could easily be guessed. At that moment the seaman, whom the skipper had sent in search of the steward, made his appearance from the companion, followed by the functionary in question. To the latter's charge I was consigned, and at his suggestion I followed him to the cabin which had been set aside for my accommodation. It proved to be situated at the after end of the saloon, and was as small and poorly furnished a place as I have ever slept in. To make use of the old nautical expression, there was scarcely room in it to swing a cat. Tiny as it was, however, it was at least better than the back street lodgings I had so lately left; and when I reflected that I had paid all I owed, had fitted myself out with a new wardrobe, and was still upwards of fifty pounds in pocket, to say nothing of being engaged on deeply interesting work, I could have gone down on my knees and kissed the grimy planks in thankfulness.

"I'm afraid, sir, it's not as large as some you've been accustomed to," said the talkative steward apologetically, as he stowed my bags away in a corner.

"How do you know what I've been accustomed to?" I asked, with a smile, as I noticed his desire for conversation.

"I could tell it directly I saw you look round this berth," he answered. "People can say what they please, but to my thinking there's no mistaking a man who's spent any time aboard ship. What line might you have been in, sir?"

I told him, and had the good fortune to discover that he possessed a brother who had served the same employ. Having thus established a bond in common, I proceeded to question him about my future charges; only to find that this was a subject upon which he was very willing to enlarge.

"Well, sir," he began, seating himself familiarly on the edge of my berth and looking up at me, "I don't know as how I ought to speak about the old gentleman at all, seeing he's a passenger and you're, so to speak, in charge of him; but this I do say without fear or favour, that who ever brought him away from his home and took him to sea at his time of life did a wrong and cruel action. Why, sir, I make so bold as to tell you that from the moment he was brought aboard this ship until this very second, he has not spoke as much as five words to me or to anybody else. He just lays there in his bunk, hour after hour, with his eyes open, looking at the deck above him, and as likely as not holding his great-granddaughter's hand, not seeming to see or hear anything, and never letting one single word pass his lips. I've known what it is to wait upon sick folk myself, having spent close upon eight months in a hospital ashore, but never in my life, sir, and I give you my word it's

gospel truth I'm telling you, have I seen anything like the way that young girl waits upon him. You'll find her a-sitting by him after breakfast, and if you go in at eight bells she'll be still the same. She has her meals brought to her and eats 'em there, and at night she gets me to make her up a bed on the deck alongside of him."

"She must indeed be devoted," I answered, considerably touched at the picture he drew.

"Devoted is no name for it," replied the man with conviction. "And it's by no means pleasant work for her, sir, I can assure you. Why, more than once when I've gone in there I've found her leaning over the bunk, her face just as white as the sheet there, holding a little looking-glass to his lips to see if he was breathing. Then she'd heave a big sigh of relief to find that there was still life in him, put the glass back in its place, and sit down beside him again, and go on holding his hand, for all the world as if she was determined to cling on to him until the Judgment Day. It would bring the tears into your eyes, I'm sure, sir, to see it."

"You have a tender heart, I can see," I said, "and I think the better of you for it. Do you happen to know anything of their history — where they hail from or who they are?"

"There is one thing I *do* know," he answered, "and that is that they're English and not Spaniards, as the cook said, and as you might very well think yourself from the name. I believe the old gentleman was a merchant of some sort in Cadiz, but that must have been fifty years ago. The young lady is his great-granddaughter, and I was given to understand that her father and mother have been dead for many years. From one thing and another I don't fancy they've got a penny to bless themselves with, but it's plain there's somebody paying the piper, because the skipper got orders from the office, just before we sailed, that everything that could be done for their comfort was to be done, and money was to be no object. But there, here I am running on in this way to you, sir, who probably know all about them better than I do."

"I assure you I know nothing at all, or at least very little," I answered. "I have simply received instructions to meet them here, and to look after the old gentleman until he reaches Newcastle. What will become of them then I can only guess. I presume, however, I may rely on you for assistance during the voyage, should I require it?"

"I'll do anything I can, sir, and you may be very sure of that," he replied. "I've taken such a liking to that young lady that there's nothing I wouldn't do in reason to make her feel a bit happier. For it's my belief she's far from easy in her mind just now. I remember once hearing an Orient steward tell of a man what was tied up with a sword hanging over his head by a single hair; he never knew from one minute to another when it would fall and do for him. Well, that's the way, I fancy, Miss Moreno is feeling. There's a sword hanging over her head or her great-grandfather's, and she doesn't know when it'll drop."

"What did you say her name was?" I inquired, for I had for the moment forgotten it.

"Moreno, sir," he replied. "The old gentleman is Don Miguel, and she is the Dona Consuelo de Moreno."

"Thank you," I said. "And now, if you will tell me where their cabin is, I think I will pay the old gentleman a visit."

"Their cabin is the one facing yours, sir, on the starboard side. If it will be any convenience to you, sir, I'll tell the young lady you're aboard. I know she expects you, because she said so only this morning."

"Perhaps it would be better that you should tell her," I replied. "If you will give her my compliments and say that I will do myself the pleasure of waiting upon her as soon as it is convenient for her to see me, I shall be obliged. I will remain here until I receive her answer."

The man departed on his errand, and during his absence I spent the time making myself as comfortable as my limited quarters would permit. It was not very long, however, before he returned to inform me that the young lady would be pleased to see me as soon as I cared to visit their cabin.

Placing my stethoscope in my pocket, and having thrown a hasty glance into the small looking-glass over the washstand, in order to make sure that I presented a fairly respectable appearance, I left my quarters and made my way across the saloon. Since then I have often tried to recall my feelings at that moment, but the effort has always been in vain. One thing is certain, I had no idea of the importance the incident was destined to occupy in the history of my life.

I knocked upon the door, and as I did so heard some one rise from a chair inside the cabin. The handle was softly turned, and a moment later the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life stood before me. I have said "the most beautiful girl," but this does not at all express what I mean, nor do I think it is in my power to do so. Let me, however, endeavour to give you some idea of what Dona Consuelo de Moreno was like.

Try to picture a tall and stately girl, in reality scarcely twenty years of age, but looking several years older. Imagine a

pale, oval face, lighted by dark lustrous eyes with long lashes and delicately pencilled brows, a tiny mouth, and hair as black as the raven's wing. Taken altogether, it was not only a very beautiful face, but a strong one, and as I looked at her I wondered what the circumstances could have been that had brought her into the power of my extraordinary employer. That she was in his power I did not for a moment doubt.

Closing the cabin door softly behind her, she stepped into the saloon.

"The steward tells me that you are Dr. Ingleby," she began, speaking excellent English, but with a slight foreign accent. Then, holding out her tiny hand to me with charming frankness, she continued: "I was informed by Dr. Nikola, in a letter I received this morning, that you would join the vessel here. It is a great relief to me to know you are on board."

I said something, I forget what, in answer to the compliment she paid me, and then inquired how her aged relative was.

"He seems fairly well at present," she answered. "As well, perhaps, as he will ever be. But, as you may suppose, he has given me a great deal of anxiety since we left Cadiz. This vessel is not a good sea boat, and in the Bay of Biscay we had some very rough weather — so rough, indeed, that more than once I thought she must inevitably founder. However, we are safely here now, so that our troubles are nearly over. I don't want you to think I am a grumbler. But I am keeping you here when perhaps you would like to see grandpapa for yourself?"

I answered in the affirmative, whereupon she softly opened the door again, and, beckoning me to follow, led the way into the cabin.

If my own quarters on the other side of the saloon had seemed small, this one seemed even smaller. There was only one bunk, and it ran below the port-hole. In this an old man was lying with his hands clasped upon his breast.

"You need not fear that you will wake him," said the girl beside me. "He sleeps like this the greater part of the day. Sometimes he frightens me, for he lies so still that I become afraid lest he may have passed away without my noticing it."

I did not at all wonder at her words. The old man's pallor was of that peculiar ivory-white which is never seen save in the very old, and then, strangely enough, in men oftener than women. His eyes were deeply sunken, as were his cheeks. At one time — forty years or so before — it must have been a powerful face; now it was beautiful only in its soft, harmonious whiteness. A long beard, white as the purest snow, fell upon, and covered his breast, and on it lay his fleshless hands, with their bony joints and long yellow nails. The better to examine him, I knelt down beside the bunk and took his right wrist between my finger and thumb. As I expected, the pulse was barely perceptible. For a moment I inclined to the belief that the end, of which his great-granddaughter had spoken only a few moments before, had come, but a second examination proved that such was not the case. I gently replaced his hand, and then rose to my feet.

"I can easily understand your anxiety," I said. "I think you are wonderfully brave to have undertaken such a voyage. However, for the future — that is to say, until we reach Newcastle — you must let me share your watch with you."

"It is very kind of you to offer to do so," she replied, "but I could not remain away from him. I have had charge of him for such a long time now that it has become like second nature to me. Besides, if he were to wake and not find me by his side, there is no saying what might happen. I am everything to him, and I know so well what he requires."

As she said this, she gave me a look that I could not help thinking was almost one of defiance, as if she were afraid that by attending to the old man's wants I might deprive her of his affection. I accordingly postponed consideration of the matter for the moment, and, having asked a few questions as to the patient's diet, retired, leaving them once more alone together. From the saloon I made my way up to the poop. The tide was serving, and preparations were being made for getting under way.

Ten minutes later our anchor was at the cathead, and we were steaming slowly down the river, and I had begun one of the most extraordinary voyages it has ever fallen to the lot of man to undertake. During the afternoon I paid several visits to my patient's cabin; but on no occasion could I discover any change in his condition. He lay in his bunk just as I had first seen him; his sunken eyes stared at the woodwork above his head, and his left hand clasped that of his great-granddaughter. To my surprise, the motion of the vessel seemed to cause him little or no inconvenience, and, fortunately for him, his nurse was an excellent sailor. It was in vain I tried to induce her to let me take her place while she went up to the deck for a little change. Her grandfather might want her, she said, and that excuse seemed to her sufficient to justify such trifling with her health. Later on, however, after dinner, I was fortunate enough to be able to induce her to accompany me to the deck for a few moments, the steward being left in charge of the patient, with instructions to call us should the least change occur. By this time we were clear of the river, and our bows were pointed in a northerly direction. Leaving the miserable companion, which ascended to the poop directly from the cuddy, we began to pace the deck. The night was cold, and, with a little shiver, my companion drew her coquettish mantilla more closely about her shoulders. There was something in her action which touched me in a manner I cannot describe. In some vague fashion it seemed to appeal to me not only for sympathy but for help. I saw the beautiful face looking up at me, and as we walked I noted the proud way in which she carried herself, and the sailor-like fashion in which she adapted herself to the rolling of the ship. It was a beautiful moonlight night, and had the vessel remained upon an even keel, it would have been very pleasant on deck. To be steady, however, was a feat the crazy old tub seemed incapable of accomplishing.

We had paced the poop perhaps half a dozen times when my companion suddenly stopped, and placing her hand upon my arm, said:

“Dr. Ingleby, you are in Dr. Nikola's confidence, I believe. Will you tell me why we are going to the North of England?”

Her question placed me in an awkward predicament. As I have said above, her loneliness, not to mention the devotion she showed to her aged relative, had touched me more than a little. On the other hand, I was Nikola's servant, employed by him for a special work, and I did not know whether he would wish me to discuss his plans with her.

“You do not answer,” she continued, as she noticed my hesitation. “And yet I feel sure you must know. It all seems so strange. Only a few weeks ago we were in our own quiet home in Spain, without a thought of leaving it. Then Dr. Nikola came upon the scene, and now we are on board this ship going up to the North of England: and for what purpose?”

“Did Nikola furnish you with no reason?” I inquired.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “He told me that if I would bring my grandfather to England to see him he would make him quite a strong man again. For some reason or another, however, I feel certain there is something behind it that is being kept from me. Is this so?”

“I am not in a position to give you any answer that would be at all likely to satisfy you,” I replied, I am afraid, a little ambiguously, “for I really know nothing. It is only fair I should tell you that I only met Dr. Nikola, myself, for the first time a few days ago.”

“But he sent you here to be with my grandfather,” she continued authoritatively. “Surely, Dr. Ingleby, you must be able to throw some light upon the mystery which surrounds this voyage?”

I shook my head, and with a little sigh of regret she ceased to question me. A few minutes later she gave me a stately bow, and, bidding me goodnight, prepared to go below. Knowing that I had deceived her, and hoping to find some opportunity of putting myself right with her, I followed her down the companion-ladder and along the saloon to her cabin.

“Perhaps I had better see my patient before I retire to rest,” I said, as we stood together at the door, holding on to the handrail and balancing ourselves against the rolling of the ship.

She threw a quick glance at me, as if for some reason she were surprised at my decision; the expression, however, passed from her face as quickly as it had come, and opening the door she entered the cabin, and I followed her. She could scarcely have advanced a step towards the bunk before she uttered an exclamation of surprise and horror. The steward, who was supposed to have been watching the invalid, was fast asleep, while the latter’s head had slipped from its pillow and was now lying in a most unnatural position, his chin in the air, his eyes open, but still fixed upon the ceiling in the same glassy stare I have described before. In her dismay the girl said something in Spanish which I am unable to interpret, and leaning over the bunk, gazed into her great-grandfather’s face as if she were afraid of what she might find there. The steward meanwhile had recovered his senses, and was staring stupidly from one to the other of us, hardly able to realise the consequences of his inattention. Though all this has taken some time to describe it was in reality the action of a moment; then signing to the steward to stand back, and gently pushing the young girl to one side, I knelt down and

commenced my examination of my patient. There could be no doubt about one thing, the old man's condition was eminently serious. If he lived at all, there was but little more than a flicker of life left in him. How to preserve that flicker was a question that at first glance appeared impossible to answer. It would have been better, and certainly kinder, to have let him go in peace. This, however, I was in honour bound not to do. He was Nikola's property, whose servant I also was, and if it were possible to keep him alive I knew I must do it.

"Oh, Dr. Ingleby, surely he cannot be dead?" cried the girl behind me, in a voice that had grown hoarse with fear. "Tell me the worst, I implore you."

"Hush!" I answered, but without looking round. "You must be brave. He is not dead. Nor will he die if I can save him."

Then turning to the steward, who was still with us, I bade him hasten to my cabin and bring me the small bag he would find hanging upon the peg behind the door. When he returned with it I took from it one of the small bottles it contained, the contents of which I had been directed by Nikola to use only in the event of the case seeming absolutely hopeless. The mixture was tasteless, odourless, and quite colourless, and of a liquidity equal to water. I poured the stipulated quantity into a spoon and forced it between the old man's lips. Somewhat to my surprise — for I must confess, after what I had seen of Nikola's power a few nights before, I had expected an instantaneous cure — the effect was scarcely perceptible. The eyelids flickered a little, and then slowly closed; a few seconds later a respiratory movement of the thorax was just observable, accompanied by a heavy sigh. For upwards of an hour I remained in close attendance upon him, noting every symptom, and watching with amazement the return of life into that aged frame from which I had begun to think it had departed for good and all. Once more I measured the quantity of medicine and gave it to him. This time the effect was more marked. At the end of ten minutes a slight flush spread over the sunken cheeks, and his breathing could be plainly distinguished. When, after the third dose, he was sleeping peacefully as a little child, I turned to the girl and held out my hand.

"He will recover," I said. "You need have no further fear. The crisis is past."

She was silent for a moment, and I noticed that her eyes had filled with tears.

"You have done a most wonderful thing," she answered, "and have punished me for my rudeness to you on deck. How can I ever thank you?"

"By ceasing to give me credit to which I am not entitled," I replied, I fear a little brusquely. "This medicine comes from Dr. Nikola, and I think should be as good a proof as you can desire of the genuineness of his offer and of his ability to make your grandfather a strong and hearty man again."

"I will not doubt him any more," she said: and after that, having made her promise to call me should she need my services, I bade her good night and left the cabin, meaning to retire to rest at once. The stuffiness of my berth, however, changed my intention. After all that had transpired, it can scarcely be wondered at that I was in a state of feverish excitement. In love with my profession as I was, it will be readily understood that I had sufficient matter before me to afford plenty of food for reflection. I accordingly filled my pipe and made my way to the deck. Once there, I found that the appearance of the night had changed; the moonlight had given place to heavy clouds, and rain was falling. The steamer was still rolling heavily, and every timber groaned as if in protest against the barbarous handling to which it was being subjected. Stowing myself away in a sheltered place near the alley-way leading to the engine-room, I fell to considering my position. That it was a curious one, I do not think any one who has read the preceding pages will doubt. A more extraordinary could scarcely be imagined, and what the upshot of it all was to be was a thing I could not at all foresee.

Having finished my pipe, I refilled it and continued my meditations. At a rough guess, I should say I had been an hour on deck when a circumstance occurred which was destined to furnish me with even more food for reflection than I already possessed. I was in the act of knocking the ashes out of my pipe before going below, when I became aware that something, I could not quite see what, was making its way along the deck in my direction under the shadow of the starboard bulwark. At first I felt inclined to believe that it was only a trick of my imagination, but when I rubbed my eyes and saw that it was a human figure, and that it was steadily approaching me, I drew back into the shadow and awaited developments. From the stealthy way in which he advanced, and the trouble he took to prevent himself being seen, I argued that, whoever the man was, and whatever his mission might be, it was not a very reputable one. Closer and closer he came, was lost to view for an instant behind the mainmast, and then reappeared scarcely a dozen feet from where I stood. For a moment I hardly knew what course to adopt. I had no desire to rouse the ship unnecessarily, and yet, for the reasons just stated, I felt morally

certain that the man was there for no lawful purpose. However, if I was going to act at all, it was plain I must do so without loss of time. Fortune favoured me, for I had scarcely arrived at this decision before the chief engineer, whose cabin looked out over the deck, turned on his electric light. A broad beam of light shot out and showed me the man standing beside the main hatch steadfastly regarding me. Before he could move I was able to take full stock of him, and what I saw filled me with amazement. *The individual was a Chinaman, and his head presented this peculiarity, that half his left ear was missing.*

As I noted the significant fact to which I have just alluded, the recollection of Nikola's letter flashed across my mind, in which he had warned me to keep my eyes open for just such another man. Could this be the individual for whom I was to be on the look-out? It seemed extremely unlikely that there could be two Mongolians with the same peculiar deformity, and yet I could scarcely believe, even if it were the same and he had any knowledge of my connection with Nikola, that he would have the audacity to travel in the same ship with me. It must not be supposed, however, that I stayed to think these things out then. The light had no sooner flashed out upon him and revealed his sinister personality, than the switch was turned off and all was darkness once more. So blinding was the glare while it did last, however, that fully ten seconds must have elapsed before my eyes became accustomed to the darkness. When I could see, the man had vanished, and though I crossed the hatch and searched, not a sign of him could I discover.

"Whoever he is," I said to myself, "he has at least the faculty of being able to get out of the way pretty quickly. I wonder what . . . but there, what's the use of worrying myself about him? He's probably a fireman who has been sent aft on a message to the steward, and when I see him in the daylight I shall find him like anybody else."

But while I tried to reassure myself in this fashion I was in reality far from being convinced. In my own mind I was as certain that he was the man against whom Nikola had warned me as I could well be of anything. The chief engineer at that moment stepped from his cabin into the alley-way. Here, I thought to myself, was an opportunity of settling the matter once and for all. I accordingly accosted him. I had been introduced to him earlier in the day by the captain, so that he knew who I was.

"That is not a very pretty fireman of yours," I began, "that Chinaman with half an ear missing. I saw him a moment ago

coming along the deck here. Where does he hail from?"

The chief engineer, who, I may remark *en passant*, was an Aberdonian, and consequently slow of speech, hesitated for a moment before he replied.

"That's mighty queer," he said at length. "Ye're the second mon who's seen him the night. D'ye tell me ye saw him this meenit? And if I may make so bold, where might that have been?"

"Only a few paces from where we are standing now," I answered. "I was smoking my pipe in the shelter there, when suddenly I detected a figure creeping along in the shadow of the bulwarks. Then you turned on your electric, and the light fell full and fair upon his face. I saw him perfectly. There could be no doubt about it. He was a Chinaman, and half his left ear was missing."

The chief engineer sucked at his pipe for upwards of half a minute.

"Queer, queer," he said, more to himself than to me, "'tis vera queer. 'Twas my second in yonder was saying he met him at eight bells in this alley-way. And yet I've been officially acquainted there's no such person aboard the ship."

"But there must be," I cried. "Don't I tell you I saw the man myself, not five minutes ago? I would be willing to go into a court of law and swear to the fact."

"Dinna swear," he answered. "I'll nae misdoubt yer word."

With this assurance I was conducted forthwith to the chart room, where we discovered the skipper stretched upon his settee, snoring voluminously.

"Do you mean to tell me that you really saw the man?" he inquired, when my business had been explained to him.

I assured him that I did mean it. I had seen him distinctly.

"Well, all I can say is that it's the most extraordinary business I ever had to do with," he answered. "The second engineer also says he saw him. Directly he told me I had the ship searched, but not a trace of the fellow could I discover. We'll try again."

Leaving the chart room, he called the bos'un to him, and, accompanied by the chief engineer and myself, commenced an exhaustive examination of the vessel. We explored the quarters of the crew and firemen forrard, the galley, stores, and officers' cabins in both alley-ways, and finally the saloon aft, but without success. Not a trace of the mysterious Mongolian could we find. The skipper shook his head.

"I don't know what to think about it," he said.

I knew that meant that he had his doubts as to whether I had not dreamt the whole affair. The inference was galling, and when I bade him goodnight and went along to my cabin, I wished I had said nothing at all about the matter. Nevertheless, I was as firmly convinced that I had seen the man as I was at the beginning. In this frame of mind I prepared myself for bed. Before turning into my bunk, however, I took down the small bag in which I kept the drugs Nikola had given me and of which he had told me to take such care. I was anxious to have them close at hand in case I should be sent for by Dona Consuelo during the night. To assure myself that they had not been broken by the rolling of the ship I opened the bag and looked inside. My astonishment may be imagined on discovering that it was empty. *The drugs were gone.*



CHAPTER 50. THE ESCAPE OF THE CHINAMAN

THE night on which I discovered that Nikola's drugs had been stolen was destined to prove unpleasant in more senses than one. The sweetest-tempered of men could scarcely have failed to take offence had they been treated as the captain had treated me. I had told him in so many words, and with as much emphasis as I was master of, that I had distinctly seen the Chinaman standing upon the main deck of his steamer. The second engineer had also entered the same report; his evidence, however, while serving to corroborate my assertion, was of little further use to me, inasmuch as I had still better proof that what I said was correct — namely, that the medicines were missing. Under the circumstances it was small wonder that I slept badly. Even had the cabin been as large as a hotel bedroom, and the bunk the latest invention in the way of comfortable couches, it is scarcely possible I should have had better rest. As it was, the knowledge that I had been outwitted was sufficient to keep me tumbling and tossing to and fro, from the moment I laid my head upon the pillow until the sun was streaming in through my porthole next morning. Again and again I went over the events of the previous day, recalling every incident with photographic distinctness; but always returning to the same point. How the man could have obtained admittance to the saloon at all was more than I could understand, and, having got there, why he should have stolen the bottles of medicine when there were so many other articles which would have seemed to be of infinitely more value to him, scattered about, was, to say the least of it, incomprehensible. Hour after hour I puzzled over it, and at the end was no nearer a solution of the enigma than at the beginning. At first I felt inclined to believe that I must have taken them from the bag myself and for security's sake have placed them elsewhere. A few moments' search, however, was sufficient to knock the bottom out of that theory. Hunt high and low, where I would, I could discover no traces of the queer little bottles. Then I remembered that when I had sent the steward for them to the Don's cabin the previous afternoon, I had taken them from the bag and placed them upon the deck beside the old man's bunk. Could I have left them there? On reconsidering the matter more carefully, however, I remembered that before leaving the cabin I had replaced them in my bag, and that as I carried them back to my berth I had bumped the satchel against the corner of the saloon table and was afraid I might have broken them. This effectually disposed of that theory also. At last the suspense of irritation, by whichever name you may describe it, became unbearable, and unable to remain in bed any longer, I rose, dressed myself, and prepared to go on deck. Entering the saloon, I found the steward busied over a number of coffee-cups.

"Good morning, sir," he said, looking up from his work. "If you'll excuse my saying so, sir, you're about early."

"I was late in bed," I answered, with peculiar significance. "How is it, my friend, that you allow people, who have no right here, to enter the saloon and to thief from the passengers' cabins?"

"To thief, sir!" the man replied in a startled tone; "I'm sure I don't understand you, sir. I allow no one to enter the saloon who has no right to *be* there."

I glanced at him sharply, wondering whether the fellow was as innocent as he pretended to be.

"At any rate," I said, "the fact remains that some one entered my cabin last night, while I was on deck, and stole the medicines with which I am treating the old gentleman in the cabin yonder."

The man looked inexpressibly shocked. "God bless my soul alive, sir — you don't mean that!" he said, with a falter in his voice. "Surely you don't mean it?"

"But I *do* mean it," I answered. "There can be no sort of doubt about it. When I left the old gentleman's cabin yesterday I carried the bag containing the medicines back with me to my own berth, locked it, and hung it upon the peg beside the looking-glass with my own hands. After that I went on deck, returned to my cabin an hour or so later, opened the bag, and the bottles were gone."

"But, sir, have you any idea who could have taken them?" the man replied. "I hope you don't think, sir, as how I should have allowed such a thing to take place in this saloon with my knowledge?"

"I hope you would not," I answered, "but that does not alter the fact that the things are missing."

"But don't you think, sir, the young lady herself might have come in search of you, and when she found you were not there did the next best thing and took away the medicines to use herself?"

"At present I do not know what to think," I replied with some hesitation, for that view of the case had not presented

itself to me. "But if there has been anything underhand going on, I think I can promise the culprit that it will be made exceedingly hot for him when we reach our destination."

Having fired this parting shot, I left him to the contemplation of his coffee-cups and made my way up the companion-ladder to the deck above. It was a lovely morning, a brisk breeze was blowing, and the steamer was running fairly steady under a staysail and a foresail. It was not the sort of morning to feel depressed, and yet the incidents of the previous night were sufficient to render me more than a little uncomfortable. Nikola had trusted me, and in the matter of the medicines at least I had been found wanting. I believe at the moment I would have given all I possessed — which was certainly not much, but still a good deal to me — to have been able to solve the mystery that surrounded the disappearance of those drugs. Shortly before eight bells the skipper emerged from the chart room and came along the hurricane deck towards the poop. Seeing me he waved his hand, and, after he had ascended the ladder from the main deck, bade me good morning. "I'm afraid our accommodation is not very good," he said, "but I trust you have passed a fairly comfortable night. No more dreams of one-eared Chinamen, I hope?"

From the tone in which he spoke it was plain that he imagined I must have been dreaming on the previous evening. Had it not been for the seriousness of my position with Nikola, I could have laughed aloud when I thought of the shell I was about to drop into the skipper's camp.

"Dreams or no dreams, Captain Windover," I replied, "I have to make a very serious complaint to you. It will remain then for you to say whether you consider that the assertion I made to you last night was, or was not, founded upon fact. As I believe you are aware, I was instructed by my principal, Dr. Nikola, to join this vessel in the Thames and to take charge of Don Miguel de Moreno until his arrival in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Dr. Nikola was fully aware of the difficulty and responsibility of the task he had assigned to me, and for this reason he furnished me with a number of very rare drugs which I was to administer to the patient as occasion demanded. In the letter of instructions which I received prior to embarking, I was particularly warned to beware of a certain Chinaman whose peculiar characteristic was that he had lost half an ear. In due course I joined your vessel, and attended the Don, used the drugs to which I have referred, and afterwards returned them to my cabin. A quarter of an hour or so later I made my way to the deck, where I found myself suddenly brought face to face with the Asiatic of whom I had been warned. On the recommendation of the chief engineer I reported the matter to you; you searched the ship, found no one at all like the man I described, and from that time forward set down the story I had told you either as a fabrication on my part, or the creation of a dream."

"Pardon me, my dear sir, not a fabrication," the skipper began: "only a —"

"Pardon me in your turn," I replied: "I have not quite finished. As I have inferred, you treat the matter with contempt. What is the result? I return to my cabin, and, before retiring to rest, in order to make sure that they are ready at hand in case I should require them during the night, open the bag in which the medicines until that moment had been stored. To my consternation they are not there. Some one had entered my cabin during my absence and stolen them. I leave you to put what construction on it you please, and to say what that some one was."

The captain's face was a study. "But — but —" he began.

"Buts will not mend the matter," I answered, I am afraid rather sharply. "There can be no getting away from the fact that they are gone, and that some one must have taken them. They could scarcely walk away by themselves."

"But supposing your suspicions to be correct, what possible use could a few small bottles of unknown medicine be to a man like that, a Chinaman? Had he taken your watch and chain, or your money, I could understand it; but from what you say, I gather that nothing else is missing."

"Nothing else," I replied, in the tone of a man who is making an admission that is scarcely likely to add to the weight of the argument he is endeavouring to adduce.

"Besides," continued the skipper, "there are half a hundred other ways in which the things might have been lost or mislaid. Last night the ship was rolling heavily: why might they not have tumbled out and have slipped under your bunk or behind your bags? I have known things like that occur."

"And would the ship have closed the bag again, may I ask?" I answered scornfully. "No, no! Captain, I am afraid that won't do. The man I reported to you last night, the one-eared Chinaman, is aboard your ship, and for some reason best known to himself he has stolen some of my property, thereby not only inconveniencing me but placing in absolute danger the life of the old man whom I was sent on board to take care of. As the thief is scarcely likely to have jumped overboard, he

must be on board now; and as he would not be likely to have stolen the bottles only to smash them, it stands to reason that he must have them in his keeping at the present moment."

"And suppose he has, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to find him for me," I answered, "or, if you don't care to take the trouble, to put sufficient men at my disposal and allow me to do so."

On hearing this the captain became very red and shifted uneasily on his feet.

"My dear sir," he said a little testily, "much as I would like to put myself out to serve you, I must confess that what you ask seems a little unreasonable. Don't I tell you I have already searched the ship twice in an attempt to find this man, and each time without success? Upon my word I don't think it is fair to ask me to do so again."

"In that case I am very much afraid I have no alternative but to make a complaint to you in writing and to hold you responsible, should Don Miguel de Moreno lose his life through this robbery which has been committed, and which you will not help me to set right."

What the captain would have answered in reply to this I cannot say; it is quite certain, however, that it would have been something sharp had not the Dofia Consuelo made her appearance from the companion hatch that moment. She struck me as looking very pale, as if she had passed a bad night. The skipper and I went forward together to meet her.

"Good morning," I said, as I took the little hand she held out to me. "I hope your great-grandfather is better this morning?"

"He has passed a fairly good-night, and is sleeping quietly at present," she answered. "The steward is sitting with him now while I come up for a few moments to get a little fresh air on deck."

The skipper made some remark about the beauty of the morning, and while he was speaking I watched the girl's face. There was an expression upon it I did not quite understand.

"I am afraid you have not passed a very good-night," I said, after the other had finished. "Yesterday's anxiety must have upset you more than you allowed me to suppose."

"I will confess that it did upset me," she answered, with her pretty foreign accent and the expressive gesticulation which was so becoming to her. "I have had a wretched night. I had such a terrible dream that I have scarcely recovered from it yet."

"I am sorry to hear that," the skipper and I answered almost together, while I added, "Pray tell us about it."

"It does not seem very much to tell," she answered, "and yet the effect it produced upon me is just as vivid now as it was then. After you left the cabin last night, Dr. Ingleby, I sat for a little while by my grandfather's side, trying to read; but finding that impossible, I retired to rest, lying upon the bed the steward is kind enough to make up for me upon the floor. I was utterly worn out, and almost as soon as I closed my eyes I fell asleep. How long I had been sleeping I cannot say, but suddenly I felt there was some one in the room who was watching me: who it was I could not tell, but that it was some one, or something, utterly repulsive to me I felt certain. In vain I endeavoured to open my eyes, but, as in most nightmares, I found it impossible to do so; and all the time I could feel this loathsome thing, whatever it was, drawing closer and closer to me. Then, putting forth a great effort, I managed to wake, or perhaps to dream that I did so. I had much better have kept my eyes closed, for leaning over me was the most horrible face I have ever seen or imagined. It was flatter than that of a European, with small, narrow eyes, and such cruel eyes."

"Good heavens!" I cried, unable to keep silence any longer, "can it be possible that you saw him too?"

Meanwhile the skipper, who had been leaning against the bulwarks, his hands thrust deep in his pockets and his cap upon the back of his head, suddenly sprang to attention.

"Can you remember anything else about the man?" he inquired.

The girl considered for a moment.

"I do not know that I can," she answered. "I can only repeat what I said before, that it was the most awful face I have ever seen in my life. — Stay, there is one other thing that I remember. I noticed that half his left ear was missing."

"It is the Chinaman!" I cried, with an air of triumph that I could no longer suppress. And as I said it I took from my pocket the letter of instruction Nikola had sent me the week before, and read aloud the passage in which he referred to the one-eared Chinaman of whom I was to beware. The effect was exactly what I imagined it would be.

"Do you mean to tell me I was not dreaming after all?" the Dona inquired, with a frightened expression on her face.

"That is exactly what I *do* mean," I answered. "And I am glad to have your evidence that you saw the man, for the reason that it bears out what I have been saying to our friend the captain here."

Then turning to that individual, I continued: "I hope, sir, you will now see the advisability of instituting another search for this man. If I were in your place I would turn the ship inside out, from truck to keelson. It seems to me outrageous that a rascal like this can hide himself on board, and you, the captain, be ignorant of his whereabouts."

"There is no necessity to instruct me in my duty," he answered stiffly, and then going to the companion called down it for the steward, who presently made his appearance on deck.

"Williams," said the skipper, "Dr. Ingleby informs me that a theft was committed in his cabin last night. He declares that a man made his way into the saloon, visiting not only his berth, but that of Don Miguel de Moreno. How do you account for this?"

"Dr. Ingleby *did* say something to me about it this morning, sir," the steward replied: "but to tell you the plain truth, sir, I don't know what to think of it. It's the first time I've ever known such a thing happen. Of course I shouldn't like to say as how Dr. Ingleby was mistaken."

"You had better not," I replied, so sharply that the man jumped with surprise.

"Anyway, sir," the steward continued, "I feel certain that if the man *had* come aft I should have heard him. I am a light sleeper, as the saying is, and I believe that a cat coming down the companion-ladder would be enough to wake me, much less a man."

"On this occasion you must have slept sounder than usual," I said. "At any rate the fact remains that the man did come; and I have to ask you once more, Captain, what you intend to do to find my stolen property?"

"I must take time to consider the matter," the captain replied. "If the man is aboard the ship, as you assert, I will find him, and if I do find him he had better look out for squalls — that's all I can say."

"And at the same time," I added, "I hope you will severely punish any member of your crew who may have been instrumental in secreting him on board."

As I said this I glanced at the steward, and it seemed to me his always sallow face became even paler than usual.

"You need not bother yourself about that," said the skipper: "you may be sure I shall do so."

Then, lifting his cap to the Dona Consuelo, he went forward along the deck; while the steward, having informed us that breakfast was upon the table, returned to the companion-ladder and disappeared below.

"What does all this mystery mean, Dr. Ingleby?" inquired my companion, as we turned and walked aft together.

"It means that there is more at the back of it than meets the eye," I replied. "Before I left London I was warned by Dr. Nikola, as you heard me say just now, to beware of a certain Asiatic with only half an ear. What Nikola feared he would do I have no notion, but there seems to be no doubt that this is the man."

"But he has done us no harm," she replied, "beyond frightening me; so if the captain takes care that he does not come as far as the saloon again, it does not seem to me we need think any more about him."

"But he *has* done us harm," I asserted — "grievous harm. He has stolen the medicine with which I treated your great-grandfather so successfully yesterday."

On hearing this she gave a little start.

"Do you mean that if he should become ill again in the same way that he did yesterday, you would be unable to save him?" she inquired, almost breathlessly.

"I cannot say anything about that," I answered. "I should of course do my best, but I must confess the loss of those drugs is a very serious matter for me. They are exceedingly valuable, and were specially entrusted to my care."

"And you think that Dr. Nikola will be angry with you for having lost them?" she said.

"I am very much afraid he will," I answered. "But if he is, I must put up with it. Now let us come below to breakfast." With that I led her along the deck and down the companion-ladder to the saloon.

"Before we sit down to our meal I think it would perhaps be as well if I saw your great-grandfather," I said. "I should like to convince myself that he is none the worse for his attack yesterday."

Upon this we entered the cabin together, and I bent over the recumbent figure of the old man. He lay just as he had done on the previous day; his long thin hands were clasped upon his breast, and his eyes looked upward just as I remembered seeing them. For all the difference that was to be seen, he might never have moved since I had left him so many hours before.

"He is awake," whispered his great-granddaughter, who had looked at him over my shoulder. Then, raising her voice a little, she continued, still in English, "This is Dr. Ingleby, grandfather, whom your friend Dr. Nikola has sent to take care of you."

"I thank you, sir, for your kindness," replied the old man, in a voice that was little louder than a whisper. "You must forgive me if my reception of you appears somewhat discourteous, but I am very feeble. A month ago I celebrated my ninety-eighth birthday, and at such an age, I venture to assert, much may be forgiven a man."

"Pray do not apologise," I replied. "I am indeed glad to find you looking so much better this morning."

"If to be still alive is to be better, then I suppose I must be," he answered, in a tone that was almost one of regret; and then continued, "The days of our age are threescore years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength but labour and sorrow; labour and sorrow — aye, labour and sorrow."

"Come, come, sir," I said, "you must not talk like this. You are not very comfortable here, but we are nearly at our journey's end. Once there, you will be able to rest more quietly and in greater comfort than it is possible for you to do in this tiny cabin."

"You speak well," he answered, "when you say that I am nearly at my journey's end. God knows I am near it — very, very near it. The wonder is I have not reached it long since. But it will come at last, and when it comes I shall rest, as you say, more quietly than in this tiny cabin."

Seeing that in his present humour there was not much to be done with him, I completed my examination, gave certain instructions to his great-granddaughter, and then left the cabin, feeling very much as if I had stepped into the nineteenth out of another and quite different century. Breakfast was laid in the saloon; and as the steward informed me that the skipper invariably had his sent forward to the chart room, while the Dona Consuelo usually partook of hers by the old gentleman's bedside, I sat down to it alone. The steward waited upon me, a trifle nervously I thought, and with an obsequiousness that told me he was anxious to make up to me for the robbery of the night before. Whatever he might think, however, I had not the smallest intention of allowing myself to be drawn into a discussion with him on the subject. The matter would have to be settled some way or another when we reached our destination, and then, in all probability, Nikola would look after it for himself.

Whatever else may be said of the good ship Dona Mercedes, her warmest admirers could scarcely assert that she possessed a wonderful turn of speed. Even with everything in her favour it was as much as the chief engineer could do to knock nine knots out of her, but on the present occasion seven was somewhere nearer her mark. For this reason, instead of reaching our destination at midday, as I had hoped we should do, night had closed in on us before we had crossed the bar and could count ourselves safely in the river, while five bells in the first watch had been sounded before we lay at anchor in the Tyneside.

As soon as I heard the cable rattling out through the hawse hole I made my way to the deck. The night was a dark one, but a more interesting picture than I had before me then could scarcely be imagined. Around me on every side were ships: colliers, tramps, passenger-vessels and merchantmen of every possible sort and description. The lights of the city could be plainly distinguished, and innumerable tongues of fire containing all the colours of the rainbow flashed up continually from factory chimneys. A couple of steam-launches were lying alongside, with at least a dozen small boats; and thinking Nikola might be in one of them, I went forward to the gangway in search of him, but though I scanned the faces below me, his was not among them. For the reason that we were so late getting into the river, and knowing that the vessel would be likely to remain for some time to come, I argued that in all probability he had put off boarding her until the morning. I accordingly turned away, and was about to walk aft when a hand was placed on my shoulder.

"Well, friend Ingleby," said a voice that there was no mistaking, and which I should have known anywhere, "what sort of a voyage have you had, and how is your patient progressing?"

"Dr. Nikola!" I cried in astonishment, as I turned and found him standing before me. "I was just looking for you in the boats alongside. I had no idea you were on board."

"I came up by the other gangway," Nikola replied. "But you have not answered my question. How is your patient?"

"He is still alive," I answered, "and I fancy, if possible, a little better than when we left London. But he is so feeble that to speak of his being well seems almost a sarcasm. Yesterday for a few moments I thought he was gone, but with the help of the drugs you gave me I managed to bring him round again. This morning he was strong enough to converse with me."

"I am pleased to hear it," he replied. "You have done admirably, and I congratulate you. Now we must think about their trans-shipment."

"Trans-shipment?" I replied. "Is it possible they have to make another journey?"

"It is more than possible — it is quite certain," he answered. "Allerdeyne Castle is a matter of some fifty miles up the coast, and a steam yacht will take us there. A bed has been prepared for the old gentleman in the saloon, and all we have to do is to get him off this boat and on board her. You had better let me have those drugs and I'll mix him up a slight stimulus. He'll need it."

This was the question I had been dreading all along, but the die was cast and willy nilly the position had to be faced.

"I should like to speak to you upon that matter," I said. "I very much fear that you will consider me to blame for not having exercised greater care over them, but I had no idea they would be of any value to any one who did not know the use of them."

"Pray what do you mean?" he asked, with a look of astonishment that I believe was more than half assumed. "To what are you alluding? Have you had an accident with the drugs?"

While we had been talking we had walked along the main deck, and were approaching the entrance leading therefrom to the cuddy, the light from which fell upon his face. There was a look upon it that I did not like. When he was in an affable mood Nikola's countenance was singularly prepossessing: when, however, he was put out by anything it was the face of a devil rather than a man.

"I exceedingly regret having to inform you that last night the drugs in question were stolen from my cabin."

In a moment he was all excitement.

"By the man of whom I bade you beware, of course — the one-eared Chinaman?"

"The same," I answered; and went on to inform him of all that had transpired since my arrival on board, including my trouble with the captain and the suspicions I entertained, without much foundation I'm afraid, against the steward. He heard me out without speaking, and when I had finished bade me wait on deck while he went below to the Morenos' cabin. While he was gone I strolled to the side, and once more stood watching the lights reflected in the water below. On an old tramp steamer a short distance astern of us a man was singing. It was one of Chevalier's coster songs, and I could recognise the words quite distinctly. The last time I had heard that song was in Cape Coast Castle, just after I had recovered from my attack of fever; and I was still pursuing the train of thought it conjured up, when I noticed a boat drawing into the circle of light to which I have just alluded. It contained two men, one of whom was standing up while the other rowed. A second or two later they had come close enough for me to see the face of the man in the bows. To my amazement he was a Chinaman! So overwhelming was my astonishment that I uttered an involuntary cry, and, running to the skylight, called to Nikola to come on deck. Then, bounding to the bulwarks again, I looked for the boat. But I was too late. Either they had achieved their object, or my prompt action had given them a fright. At any rate, they were gone.

"What do you want?" cried Nikola, who by this time had reached the deck.

"The Chinamen!" I cried. "I saw one of them a moment ago in a boat alongside."

"Where are they now?" he inquired.

"I cannot see them. They have disappeared into the darkness again; but when I called to you they were scarcely twenty yards away. What does their presence here signify, do you think?"

"It signifies that they know that I am on board," answered Nikola, with a queer sort of smile upon his face. "It means also that, although this is the nineteenth century and the law-abiding land of England, if we were to venture a little out of the beaten track ashore to-night, you and I would stand a very fair chance of having our throats cut before morning. It has one other meaning, and that is that you and I must play the old game of the partridge and its nest, and lure them away from this boat while the skipper transfers Don Miguel and his great-granddaughter to the yacht I have in waiting down the river."

"That is all very well," I interrupted, "but I am not at all sure the skipper would be willing. To put it bluntly, he and I

have already had a few words together over this matter.”

“That will make no difference,” Nikola answered. “I assure you you need have no fear that he will play us false: he knows me far too well to attempt that. I will confer with him at once, and while I am doing so you had better get your traps together. We will then go ashore and do our best to draw these rascals off the scent.”

So saying, Nikola made his way forward towards the chart room, while I went through the cuddy to my own berth. The steward carried my bags out on to the main deck, and, after I had spoken a word or two with Dona Consuelo, I followed him. Five minutes later Nikola joined me, accompanied by the captain. I had bidden the latter good-bye earlier in the evening, and Nikola was giving him one last word of advice, when I happened to glance towards the alley-way on the port side. Imagine my surprise — nay, I might almost say my consternation — on beholding, standing in the dark by the corner of the main hatch, the same mysterious Chinaman who I felt certain had committed the robbery of the drugs the previous night.

“Look, look,” I cried to my companions; “see, there is the man again!”

They wheeled round and looked in the direction to which I pointed. At the same moment the man’s right arm went up, and from where I stood I could see something glittering in the palm. An inspiration, how or by what occasioned I shall never be able to understand, induced me to seize Nikola by the arm and to swing him behind me. It was well that I did so, for almost before we could realise what was happening, a knife was thrown, and stood imbedded a good three inches in the bulwark, exactly behind where Nikola had been standing an instant before. Then, springing on to the ladder which leads from the main to the hurricane deck, he raced up it, jumped on to the rail, and dived headlong into the water alongside. By the time we reached the deck whence he had taken his departure, all we could see was a boat pulling swiftly in the direction of the shore.

“That settles it, friend Ingleby,” said Nikola.

“We have no alternative now but to make our way ashore and do as I proposed. If you are ready, come along. I think I can safely promise you an adventure.”



CHAPTER 51. ALLERDEYNE CASTLE

When, nowadays, I look back upon the period I spent in Nikola's company, one significant fact always strikes me, and that is the enormous number of risks we managed to cram into such a comparatively short space of time. During my somewhat chequered career I have perhaps seen as much of what is vaguely termed life as most men: I have lived in countries the very reverse of civilised; I have served aboard ships where there has been a good deal more sandbagging and hazing than would be considered good for the average man's Christian temperament; and as for actual fighting, well, I have seen enough of that to have learnt one lesson — one which will probably cause a smile to rise on the face of the inexperienced — and that is to keep out of it as far as possible, and on all occasions to be afraid of firearms.

I concluded my last chapter with an account of our arrival in Newcastle, and explained how we were preparing to go ashore, when the one-eared Chinaman, who I felt convinced had committed the robbery of the previous night, made his appearance before us and came within an ace of taking Nikola's life. Had it not been for my presence of mind, or instinct, by whichever term you please to call it, I verily believe it would have been the end of all things for the Doctor. As it was, however, the knife missed its mark, and a moment later the man had sprung up the ladder to the hurricane deck and leaped the rail and plunged into the river. Being desirous of preventing the Chinaman from following us and by that means becoming aware that we were leaving for the north in Nikola's yacht, we determined to make our way ashore and permit them to suppose that we were remaining in Newcastle for some length of time. Accordingly we descended into the wherry alongside, and ordered the boatman to pull us to the nearest landing-stage.

"Keep your eyes open and your wits about you," whispered Nikola, when we had left the boat and were making our way up to the street. "They are certain to be on the look-out for us."

As you may be sure, I did not neglect his warning. I had had one exhibition of that diabolical Celestial's skill in knife throwing, and when I reflected that in a big town like Newcastle there were many dark corners and alley-ways, and also that a knife makes but little or no noise when thrown, I was more determined than ever to neglect no opportunity of looking after my own safety. When we reached the street at the rear of the docks Nikola cast about him for a cab, but for some minutes not one was to be seen. At last a small boy obtained one for us, and when the luggage had been placed on the roof we took our seats in it. Nikola gave the driver his instructions, and in a short time we were bowling along in the direction of our hotel. Throughout the drive I could see no signs of the enemy. I was in the act of wondering how such a game as we were then playing could possibly help us if the Celestials had failed to see us come ashore, when Nikola turned to me, and in his usual quiet voice said:

"I wonder if you have noticed that we are being followed?"

I replied that I certainly had not, nor could I see how he could tell such a thing.

"Very easily," he said: "I will prove that what I say is correct. Do you remember the small boy who went in search of a cab?"

I answered that I did, whereupon he bade me examine our reflection as we passed the next shop window. I did so, and could plainly distinguish a small figure seated on the rail at the back. Save this atom, ourselves, and a solitary policeman, the street was deserted.

"I *do* see a small boy," I answered; "but may he not be coming with us to try and obtain the job of carrying our luggage?"

"He is engaged upon another now. When he came up from the river he was on the look-out for us, although, as you may have noticed, he pretended to be asleep in a doorway. He obtained the cab for us, and as you stepped into it he ranged up alongside and handed something to the driver. When we alight he will wait to see that our luggage is carried in, after which he will decamp and carry the information to his employers, who will endeavour to cut our throats as soon as the opportunity occurs."

"You look at the matter in an eminently cheerful light," I said. "For my own part I have no desire to give them the chance just yet. Is there no way in which we can prevent such a possibility occurring?"

"It is for that reason that we are here," Nikola replied. "I can assure you I am no more anxious to die than you are."

There would be a good deal of irony in having perfected a scheme for prolonging life, only to meet one's death at the hand of a Chinese ruffian in a civilised English tower."

"Then what is your plan?" I inquired.

"I will tell you. But do not let us speak so loud: little pitchers have long ears. My notion is that we make for the hotel, the name of which I was careful to give the driver in the hearing of the boy. We will engage a couple of rooms there, order breakfast for to-morrow morning, still in the hearing of the boy, and afterwards get out of the way as quietly as possible."

"It sounds feasible enough," I replied, "if only we can do it. But do you think the men will be so easily fooled?"

"Well, that remains to be proved. However, we shall very soon find out."

"A pretty sort of thing you've let yourself in for, Master Ingleby!" I thought to myself as Nikola lapsed into silence once more. "A week ago you were starving in a back street in London, and now it looks very much as if you are going to be murdered in affluence in Newcastle. However, you've let yourself in for it, and have only yourself to blame for the result."

Consoling myself in this philosophic way, I held my peace until the cab drew up before the hostelry to which my companion had alluded. As soon as we were at a standstill, Nikola alighted and went into the hotel to inquire about rooms. As we had agreed, I remained in the cab until he returned.

"It's all right, Ingleby," he cried, as he crossed the pavement again. "They're very full, but we can have the rooms until the day after to-morrow. After that we must look elsewhere. Now let us get the traps inside."

The porter emerged and took our luggage, and we accompanied him into the building. As we did so I saw the ragged urchin who had ridden behind the cab draw near the portico.

The manager received us in the hall. "Numbers 59 and 60," he said to the porter. "Would you care for any supper, gentlemen?" We thanked him, but declined, and then followed the porter upstairs to the rooms in question. Having seen my luggage safely installed and the man on his way downstairs, Nikola showed himself ready for business.

"When you get into these sort of scrapes," he said, "it is just as well to have a good memory. I know these rooms of old, and directly I saw the position we were in I thought they might prove of use to us. I once did the manager a good turn, and when I explain matters to him I fancy he will understand why we have taken up our abode with him only to leave again so suddenly. Have you a sheet of notepaper and an envelope in your bag?"

I produced them for him, whereupon he wrote a note, and having placed a bank-note inside, addressed it to his friend.

"I'll leave it on the chimneypiece, where the chambermaid will be certain to see it," he said. "I have told the manager that we are obliged to leave in this unceremonious fashion in order to rid ourselves of some unpleasant fellow-travellers, who have been following us about with what I can only think must be hostile intent. Until we return I have asked him to take charge of your baggage, so that you need have no fear on that score. I am sorry you should have to lose it, but I can lend you anything you may require until you get possession of it again. Now, if only we can get out of this window and down to the Tyneside once more, without being seen, I think we may safely say we have given Quong Ma the slip for good and all."

So saying he crossed the room and threw open the window.

"We are both active men," Nikola continued, "and should experience small difficulty in dropping on to the roof of the outhouse below; thence we can make our way along the wall to the back. Are you ready?"

"Quite ready," I answered; whereupon he crawled out of the window and, holding on by both hands, lowered himself until his feet were only a yard or so above the roof of the outhouse to which he had referred. Then he let go and dropped. I followed his example, after which we made our way in Indian file along the wall, passed the stables, and dropped without adventure into the dark lane at the rear of the hotel. It was the first time in my life I had left a building of that description in such an unceremonious fashion, yet, strangely enough, I remember, it caused me no surprise. In Nikola's company the most extraordinary performances seemed commonplace, and in the natural order of things.

"From now forward we must proceed with the greatest caution," said my companion, as we regained our feet and paused before making our way down the dark lane towards a small street at the farther end. "They are scarcely likely to watch the back of the hotel, but it will be safer for us to suppose them to be doing so."

Acting up to this decision, we proceeded with as much caution as if every shadow were an enemy and every doorway contained a villainous Celestial. We saw nothing of the men we feared, however, and eventually reached the thoroughfare

leading to the docks, without further adventure. But, fortunate as we had been, we were not destined to get away as successfully as we had hoped to do. We were within sight of the river when something, I cannot now remember what, induced me to look back. I did so just in time to catch a glimpse of a figure emerging from the shadow of a tall building. At any other time such a circumstance would have given rise to no suspicion in my mind; but, worked up to such a pitch as I was then, I seemed gifted with an unerring instinct that told me as plainly as any words that the man in question was following us, and that he was the Chinaman we were so anxious to avoid. I pointed him out to Nikola, and asked whether he agreed with me as to the man's identity.

"We will soon decide that point," was his reply. "Slacken your pace for a moment, and when I give the word wheel sharply round and walk towards him."

We executed this manoeuvre, and began to walk quickly back in the direction we had come. The mysterious figure was still making his way along the darker side of the street; and our suspicions were soon confirmed, for on seeing us turn he turned also, and a few seconds later disappeared down a side street.

"He is spying on us, sure enough," said Nikola, "and I do not see how we are going to baffle him. Let us hasten on to the river and trust to luck to get on board the yacht without his finding out where we have gone."

Once more we turned ourselves about, and in something less than five minutes had reached the landing-place for which we were steering. Then pulling a whistle from his pocket, Nikola blew three sharp notes upon it. An answer came from the deck of the yacht out in the stream. It had scarcely died away before a boat put off from alongside the craft and came swiftly towards us.

"It is only a question of minutes now," said Nikola, throwing a hasty glance round him. "Time *versus* the Chinaman, and if I am not mistaken — here the boat drew up at the steps — "time has the best of it. Come along, my friend; let us get on board."

I followed him down the steps and took my place in the dinghy. The men pulling bent to their oars, and we shot out into the stream.

"Look," said Nikola, pointing to the place we had just left: "I thought our friend would not be very far behind us."

I followed with my eyes the direction in which he pointed, and, sure enough, I could just distinguish a dark figure standing upon the steps.

"They would like to catch me if they could," observed the Doctor, with a shrug of his shoulders and one of his peculiar laughs. "If they have tried once they have done so a hundred times. I will do them the credit of saying that their plans have been admirably laid, but Fate has stood by me, and on each occasion they have miscarried. They tried it first at Ya-Chow-Fu, then at I-chang, afterwards in Shanghai, Rangoon, Bombay, London, Paris, and St. Petersburg, and I can't tell you how many other places; but as you see, they have not succeeded so far."

"But why should they do it?" I asked. "What is the reason of it all?"

"That is too long a story for me to tell you now," he replied, as the boat drew up at the accommodation-ladder. "You shall hear it another day. Our object now must be to get away from Newcastle without further loss of time."

I followed him along the deck to where a short stout man stood waiting to receive us.

"Are you ready, Stevens?" asked Nikola.

"All ready, sir," the other replied, with the brevity of a man who is not accustomed to waste his words.

"In that case let us start as quickly as possible."

"At once," the man replied, and immediately went forward; while Nikola conducted me down a prettily arranged and constructed companion-ladder to the saloon below. As we reached it I heard the tinkle of the telegraph from the bridge to the engine room, and almost simultaneously the screw began to revolve and we were under way. After the darkness outside, the brilliant light of the saloon in which we now stood was so dazzling that I failed to notice the fact that a bedplace had been made up behind the butt of the mizzen mast. Upon this lay the old Don, and seated by his side, and holding his hand, was the Dona Consuelo.

"My dear young lady," said Nikola in his kindest manner, as he advanced towards her, "I fear you must be worn out. However, we are under way again now, and I have instructed my servant to prepare a cabin for you, in which I trust you will be fairly comfortable."

Dona Consuelo had risen, and was standing looking into his face as if she were frightened of something he was about to say.

"I am not at all tired," she said, "and if you don't mind, I would far rather remain here with my great-grandfather."

"As you wish," answered Nikola abstractedly. Then, stooping, he raised the old man's left hand and felt his pulse. The long, thin fingers of the Doctor, indicative of his extraordinary skill as a surgeon, seemed to twine round the other's emaciated wrist, while his face wore a look I had never seen upon it before — it was that of the born enthusiast, the man who loves his profession more than aught else in the world. While, however, I was observing Nikola, you must not suppose I was regardless of the Dona Consuelo. To a student of character, the expression upon her face could scarcely have been anything but interesting. While Nikola was conducting his examination, she watched him as if she dreaded what he might do next. Fear there was in abundance, but of admiration for the man I could discover no trace. The examination concluded, Nikola addressed two or three pertinent questions to her concerning her great-grandfather's health during the voyage, which she answered with corresponding clearness and conciseness. The old man himself, however, though conscious, did not utter a word, but lay staring up at the skylight above his head, just as I had seen him do on board the *Dotta Mercedes*.

Fully five hours must have elapsed before we reached our destination; indeed, day had broken, and the sun was in the act of rising, when a gentle tapping upon the skylight overhead warned Nikola that our voyage was nearly at an end. Leaving the old man in his great-granddaughter's care, Nikola signed to me to follow him to the deck.

"It may interest you to see your future home," he said, as we stepped out of the companion into the cool morning air, and looked out over the sea, which the rim of the newly risen sun was burnishing until it shone like polished silver. At the moment the yacht was entering a small bay, surrounded by giant cliffs, against which the great rollers of the North Sea broke continuously. The bay itself was in deep shadow, and was as dreary a place as any I have seen. I looked about me for a dwelling of any sort, but not a sign of such a thing could I discover: only a long stretch of frowning cliff and desolate, wind-swept tableland.

"At first glance it does not look inviting," said Nikola, with a smile upon his face, as he noticed the expression upon mine. "I confess I have seen a more hospitable coast-line, but never one better fitted for the work we have in hand."

"But I do not see the castle," I replied. "I have looked in every direction, but can discover no trace of it."

"One of its charms," he continued triumphantly. "You cannot see it because at present it is hidden by yonder headland. When we are safely in the bay, however, you will have a good view of it. It is a fine old building, and in bygone days must have been a place of considerable importance. Ships innumerable have gone to pieces in sight of its turrets; while deep down in its own foundations I am told there are dungeons enough to imprison half the county. See, we are opening up the bay now, and in five minutes shall be at anchor. I wonder what result we shall have achieved when we next steam between these heads."

While he was speaking we had passed from the open sea into the still water of the bay, and the yacht was slowing down perceptibly. Gradually the picture unfolded itself, until, standing out in bold relief upon the cliffs like some grim sentinel of the past, the castle which, for some time to come at least, was destined to be my home came into view. Who its architect had been I was never able to discover, but he must have been impregnated with the desolation and solemn grandeur of the coast, and in his building have tried to equal it. As Nikola had said, a place better fitted for the work we had come to do could not have been discovered in the length and breadth of England. The nearest village was upwards of twelve miles distant; farms or dwelling-houses there were none within view of its towers. Tourists seldom ventured near it, for the reason that it was not only a place difficult of approach, but, what was perhaps of more importance, because there was nothing of interest to be seen when you reached it. As I gazed at it, I thought of the girl in the saloon below, and wondered what her feelings would be, and what her life would be like, in such a dismal place. I glanced at Nikola, who was gazing up at the grim walls with such rapt attention that it was easily seen his thoughts were far away. Then the telegraph sounded, and the screw ceased to revolve. The spell was broken, and we were recalled to the realities of the moment.

"I was miles away," said Nikola, looking round at me.

"I could see you were," I answered.

"You would be very surprised if you knew of what I was thinking," he continued. "I was recalling a place not unlike this, but ten thousand miles or more away. It is a monastery, similarly situated, on the top of enormous cliffs. It was there I obtained the secret which is the backbone of the discovery we are about to test. I have been in some queer places in my

time, but never such a one as that. But we haven't time to talk of that now. What we have to do is to get the old man ashore and up to yonder building. If anything were to happen to him now, I think it would break my heart."

"And his great-granddaughter's also," I put in; "for you must admit she is devoted to him."

He threw a quick glance at me, as if he were trying to discern how far I was interested in the beautiful girl in the saloon below. Whatever conclusion he may have come to, however, he said nothing to me upon the subject. Having ordered the captain to see the boat — which had been specially prepared for the work of carrying the old gentleman ashore — brought alongside, he made his way to the saloon, and I accompanied him.

"We have reached our destination, Dona Consuelo," he said, as he approached the bed, beside which she was sitting.

As he spoke, there leapt into her eyes the same look of terror I had noticed before. It reminded me more than anything else of the expression one sees in the eyes of a rabbit when the snare has closed upon it. As I noticed it, for the first time since I had known him, a feeling of hatred for Nikola came over me. It was not until we were in the boat and were making our way ashore that I found an opportunity of speaking to her without Nikola overhearing us.

"Courage, my dear young lady, courage!" I said. "Believe me, there is nothing to fear. I will pledge my life for your safety."

She gave me a look of gratitude, and stooped as if to arrange the heavy travelling-rug covering her aged relative. In reality I believe it was to hide the tears with which her eyes were filled. From that moment there existed an indefinable, real bond between us; and though I did not realise it at the moment, the first mark had been made upon the chain with which Nikola imagined he had bound me to him.

On reaching that side of the bay on which there was a short strip of beach, the boat was grounded. The four sailors immediately took up the litter upon which the old man lay, and carried it ashore. The path up to the castle was a steep and narrow one, and the work of conveying him to the top was by no means easy. Eventually, however, it was accomplished, and we stood before the entrance to the castle. Moat there was none, but in place of it, and spanned by the drawbridge — a ponderous affair, something like fifty feet long by ten wide — was an enormous chasm going sheer down in one drop fully two hundred feet. At the bottom water could be seen; and at night, when the tide came in, the gurgling and moaning that rose from it was sufficient to appal the stoutest heart.

"Welcome to Allerdeyne Castle!" said Nikola, as we crossed the bridge and entered the archway of the ancient keep. Then, bending over the old man on the litter, he added: "When you cross this threshold again, my old friend, I hope that you will be fully restored to health and strength — a young man again in every sense of the word. Dona Consuelo, I am all anxiety to hear your opinion of the apartments I have caused to be prepared for you."

Moving in procession as before, we crossed the great courtyard, which echoed to the sound of our footsteps, and, reaching a door on the farther side, entered and found ourselves standing in a well-proportioned hall, from which a staircase of solid stone, up which a dozen soldiers might have marched abreast, led to the floors above. With Nikola still in advance, we made the ascent, turned to the right hand, and proceeded along a corridor, upwards of fifty yards in length, out of which opened a number of lofty rooms. Before the door of one of these Nikola paused.

"This is the apartment I have set aside for your own particular use, my dear young lady," he said; and with that he threw open the door, and showed us a large room, carpeted, curtained, and furnished in a fashion I was far from expecting to find in so sombre a building.

"Should there be anything wanting," he said, "you will honour me by mentioning it, when I will do all that lies in my power to supply it."

Her face was very pale, and her lips trembled a little as she faltered a question as to where her great-grandfather was to be domiciled.

"I have come to the conclusion that, for the future, it would be better," said Nikola, speaking very slowly and distinctly, as if in anticipation of future trouble, "that you should entrust him to my care. Ingleby and I, between us, will make ourselves responsible for his safety, and you may rest assured we will see that no harm comes to him. You must endeavour to amuse yourself as best you can, consoling yourself with the knowledge that we are doing all that science can do for him."

As he said this he smiled a little sarcastically, as if her reading of the word science would be likely to differ considerably from his.

"But surely you do not mean that I am to give him up to you entirely?" she cried, this time in real terror. "You cannot

be so cruel as to mean that. Oh, Dr. Nikola, I implore you not to take him altogether from me. I cannot bear it.”

“My dear young lady,” said Nikola, a little more sternly than he had yet spoken, “in this matter you must be guided by me. I can brook no interference of any description. Surely you should know me well enough by this time to be aware of that.”

“But he is all I have to live for — all I have to love,” the girl faltered. “Can you not make allowance for that?”

Her voice was piteous in its pleading, and when I heard Nikola’s chilling tones as he answered her, I could have found it in my heart to strike him. To have interfered at all, however, would have done no sort of good; so, hard as it seemed, I was perforce compelled to hold my tongue.

“If you love your great-grandfather,” he said, “you will offer no opposition to my scheme. Have I not already assured you that I will return him to you a different man? But we are wasting time, and these stone corridors are too cold and draughty for him. If you will be guided by me, you will rest a little after your exertions. There is an old woman below who shall come to you, and do her best to make herself useful to you.” Seeing that to protest further would be useless, the girl turned and went into the room, trying to stifle the sobs that would not be kept back. The sight was one which would have grieved a harder heart than mine, and it hurt me the more because I knew that I was powerless to help her.

All this time the four sailors, who had carried the litter up from the beach, had been silent spectators of the scene. Now they took up their burden once more and followed Nikola, along the corridor, up some more steps, down still another passage, until I lost all count of the way that we had come. The greater portion of the castle had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Heavy masses of cobwebs stretched from wall to wall, a large proportion of the doors were worm-eaten, and in some instances had even fallen in altogether, revealing desolate apartments, in which the wind from the sea whistled, and the noise of the waves echoed with blood-curdling effect. Reaching the end of the second corridor, Nikola paused before a heavy curtain which was drawn closely from wall to wall, and ordered the men to set down their burden. They obeyed; and, on being told to do so, took their departure with as much speed as they could put into the operation. If I know anything of the human face, they were not a little relieved at receiving permission to clear out of a place that had every right to be considered the abode of a certain Old Gentleman whom it scarcely becomes me to mention.

When the sound of their footsteps had died away, Nikola drew back the curtain and displayed a plain but very strong wooden door. From the fact that the workmanship was almost new I surmised that my host had placed it there himself, but for what purpose I could only conjecture. Taking a key from his pocket, he slipped it into the patent lock, turned the handle, and the door swung open.

“Take up your end of the litter,” he said, “and help me to carry it inside.”

I did as I was ordered; and, bearing the old man between us, we passed into that portion of the castle which, as I soon discovered, he had fitted up in readiness for the great experiment.

Having passed the door, we found ourselves in a comparatively lofty room, or perhaps I had better say hall, the walls of which were covered almost entirely with anatomical specimens. From what I could see of them I should say that many of them were quite unique, while all were extremely valuable. Where and by what means he had collected them I was never able to discover, although Nikola, on one or two occasions, threw out hints. There they were, however, and I promised myself that during my stay in the place I would use them for perfecting my own knowledge on the subject.

At the end of this hall, and looking over the sea, was a large window, while in either wall were several doors, all of which, like that in the corridor, were heavily curtained. The carpet was of cork and quite noiseless; the lights were electric, the batteries and dynamos being in a room below. The heating arrangements were excellent, while the ventilation was of the most modern and improved description. I noticed that Nikola smiled a little contemptuously at my astonishment.

“You were unprepared for this surprise,” he said. “Well, let me give you a little piece of advice, and that is, never be astonished at anything you may see or hear while you are with me. The commonplace and I, I can assure you once and for all, do not live together. I have homes in all parts of the world; I am in England to-day, engaged upon one piece of work, and in six months’ time I may be in India, Japan, Peru, Kamtschatka, or if you like it better, shall we say playing tricks with niggers in Cape Coast Castle? But see, we are keeping our old friend waiting. I will find out if all the preparations I have ordered are complete; if so, we will convey him at once to the chamber set apart for him.”

With that he touched a bell, and almost before he had removed his finger from the button, a curtain at the farther end was drawn aside, and the same Chinese servant — the deaf-and-dumb individual, I mean, who had brought the letter to me at my lodgings in London the previous week — entered the room. Seeing his master, he bent himself nearly double, and when he had resumed his upright posture as curious a conversation commenced as ever I have known. I use the word “conversation” for the simple reason that I do not know how else to describe it. As a matter of fact it was not a conversation at all, for the reason that not a word was spoken on either side; their lips moved, but not a sound came from them. And yet they seemed quite able to understand one another. If, however, it was a strange performance, it had at least the merit of being an extremely successful one.

“He tells me that everything is prepared,” Nikola remarked, as the man crossed the room and drew back another curtain from a doorway on our left. “This is the room; but before we carry him into it I think we had better have a little light upon the subject.”

To press the electric switch was the work of a moment, and as soon as this had been done we once more took up our burden and carried it into the inner room. Prepared as I had been by the outer hall for something extraordinary, I was perhaps not so much surprised at the apartment in which I now found myself as I should otherwise have been. And yet it was sufficiently remarkable to fill any one with wonder.

It was upwards of twenty feet in length by possibly eighteen in width. The walls and the ceilings were as black as charcoal, and, when the electric light was extinguished, not a ray of anything would be visible. In the centre was a strange contrivance which I could see was intended to serve as a bed, and for some other purpose, which at the moment was not quite apparent to me. In the farther corners were a couple of queer-looking pieces of machinery, one of which reminded me somewhat of an unusually large electric battery; the other I could not understand at all. A machine twice the size of those usually employed for manufacturing ozone stood opposite the door; thermometers of every sort and description were arranged at intervals along the walls; while on one side was an ingenious apparatus for heating the room, and on the other a similar one for cooling it. At the head and foot of the bed were two brass pillars, the construction and arrangements of which reminded me of electric terminals on an exaggerated scale.

We placed the old gentleman on the bed. The litter was thereupon removed by the servant, and Nikola and I stood facing each other across the form of the man who was to prove, or disprove, the feasibility of the discovery my

extraordinary employer claimed to have made.

“For twenty-four hours,” said Nikola, “he must have absolute peace and quiet. Nothing must disturb him. Nor must he taste food.”

“But is he capable, do you think,” I asked, “of going without nourishment for so long a time?”

“Perfectly! On the draught I am about to administer to him, he could do without it, were such a thing necessary, for a much longer period. Indeed, it would not hurt him if he were to eat nothing for a month.”

He left the room for a moment, and when he returned he carried in his hand a tiny phial of the same description, though much smaller, as those which had been stolen from me on board the steamer. It contained a thick, red mixture, which, when he removed the stopper, threw off a highly pungent odour. He opened the mouth of the patient and poured upwards of a teaspoonful into it. As before, I expected to see some immediate result, but my curiosity was not gratified. Deftly arranging the bed-coverings, Nikola inspected the thermometers, tested the hot and cold air apparatus, and then turned to me.

“He will require little or no supervision for some hours to come,” he said, “so we may safely leave him. To while away the time, if you care about it, I will show you something of my abode. I think I can promise you both instruction and amusement.”



CHAPTER 52. LIFE IN THE CASTLE

LEAVING the room in which we had placed Don Miguel de Moreno, as described in the previous chapter, we returned to the hall, the same in which was contained the magnificent collection of anatomical specimens already mentioned. Tired as I was — for it must be remembered that I had had but little sleep during the first night I had spent on board the *Dona Mercedes*, and none at all on that through which we had just passed, while I had had a great deal of excitement, and my fair share of hard work — I would not have lost the opportunity of exploring Nikola's quarters in this grim old castle for any consideration whatsoever. Nikola himself, though one would scarcely have thought it from his appearance, must have possessed a constitution of iron, for he seemed as fresh as when I had first seen him at Kelleran's house in London. There was a vitality about him, a briskness, and, if I may so express it, an enjoyment of labour for its own sake, that I do not remember ever to have found in another man. As I was soon to discover, my description of him was not very wide of the mark. He would do the work of half a dozen men, and at the end be ready, and not only ready but eager, for more. In addition to this, I noticed another peculiarity about him. Unlike most people who are fond of work, he possessed an infinite fund of patience; could wait for an issue, whatever it might be, to develop itself naturally, and, unlike so many experimentalists, betrayed no desire to hurry it by the employment of extraneous means. In thus putting forward my reading of the most complex character that has ever come under my notice, I do so with an absolute freedom from bias. Indeed, I might almost say, that I do so in a great measure against my own inclinations, as will be apparent to you when you have finished my story.

"As I informed you in London," said this strange individual, after he had closed the door of the patient's room behind him, had drawn the heavy curtain, and switched off the electric light, "I purchased this famous castle expressly for the experiment we are about to try. The owner, so my business people informed me, was amazed that I should want it at all; but then, you see, he did not understand its value. If I had searched the world, I could not have discovered a better. While we are near enough to civilisation to be able to obtain anything we may require in the way of drugs or incidental apparatus, we have no prying neighbours; such household stores as we require the yacht brings us direct from Newcastle; an old man and woman, who take care of the place when I am absent, have their quarters in the keep; my Chinese servant cooks for me personally, and attends to the wants, which are not many, of the other people under my care."

"Other people under your care?" I echoed. "I had no idea there was any one in the house save yourself and your servants."

"It is scarcely likely you would have any idea of it," he observed, "seeing that no one knows of it save Ah-Win, who, for reasons you have seen, is unable to talk about them, and myself, who would be even less likely to do so. Would you care to see them?"

I replied that I would very much like to do so, and he was about to lead me across the hall towards the door, through which the Chinese servant had entered some little time before, when a curious circumstance happened. With a bound that was not unlike the spring of a tiger, an enormous cat, black as the Pit of Tophet, jumped from the room, and, approaching his master, rubbed himself backwards and forwards against his legs. Seeing my astonishment, Nikola condescended to explain.

"You are going to say, I can tell, that you have never seen such a cat as Apollyon. I don't suppose you have. If he could talk, he would be able to tell some strange stories; would you not, old man? He has been my almost constant companion for many years, and more than once he has been the means of saving my life."

Replacing Apollyon, whom he had picked up, on the floor, he conducted me towards the entrance of another corridor which led in the direction of the keep. Half-way down it was a rough iron gate, which was securely padlocked.

Nikola undid it, and when we were on the other side carefully relocked it after him.

"Though you might not think so," he said, "these precautions are necessary. Some of my patients are extremely valuable, and I have not the least desire that they should escape from my keeping and fall over the battlements into the sea below. Follow me."

I accompanied him towards yet another door, which he also unlocked. The scene which met my gaze when he threw it open, to employ a hackneyed phrase, beggars description. The room was about the same size as that occupied by the Dona

Consuelo, but it was not its proportions that amazed me, but its occupants. Accustomed as I had necessarily been, by virtue of my profession, to what are commonly called horrors, I found that I was not proof against what I had before me now. It was sufficient to make my blood run cold. Anything more gruesome could scarcely have been discovered or even imagined. Try to picture for yourself the inmates of a dozen freak museums, and the worst of the monstrosities of which you have ever read or heard, and you will only have some dim notion of the folk whom Nikola so ironically called his patients. Some were like men, but not men as we know them; some were like monkeys, but of a kind I had never seen before, and which I sincerely hope I may never see again; there were things, dull, flabby, faceless things — but there, I can go no farther. To attempt to describe them to you in detail is a work of which my pen is quite incapable.

“A happy family,” said Nikola, advancing into the room, “and without exception devoted to their nurse, Ah-Win, yonder, who, as you are aware, in a measure shares their afflictions with them. Some day, if you care about it, I should be only too pleased to give you a lecture, with demonstrations, such as you would get in no medical school in the world.”

Though I have attempted to set down his offer word for word, I have but the vaguest recollection of it; for, long before he had finished speaking, I had staggered, sick and faint with horror, into the corridor outside. Not for the wealth of England would I have remained there a minute longer. To see those loathsome creatures fawning round Nikola, clutching at his legs and stroking his clothes, was too much for me, and I verily believe an hour in that room would have had the effect of making me an idiot like themselves. A few moments later Nikola joined me in the passage.

“You are very easily affected, my dear Ingleby,” he said, with one of his peculiar smiles. “I should have thought your hospital experience would have endowed you with stronger nerves. My poor people in yonder —”

“Don’t, don’t,” I cried, holding up my hand in entreaty. “Don’t speak to me of them. Don’t let me think of them. If I do, I believe I shall go mad. My God! are you human, that you can live with such things about you?”

“I believe I am,” he answered with the utmost coolness. “But why make such a fuss? Do like I do, and regard them from a scientific standpoint only. The poor things have come into this world handicapped by misfortune; I endeavour as far as possible to ameliorate their conditions, and in return they enable me to perfect my knowledge of the human frame as no other living man can ever hope to do. Of course, I know there are people who look askance at me for keeping them; but that does not trouble me. At one time they lived with me in Port Said, which, when you come to think of it, is a fit and proper place for such a hospital. Circumstances, however, combined to induce me to leave. Eventually we came here. Some time, if you care to hear it, I will tell you the story of their voyage home. It would interest you.”

I protested, however, that I desired to hear no more about them; I had both seen and heard too much already. That being so, Nikola led me along the passage and through the iron gate, which he locked behind him as before, and so conducted me to the hall whence we had first set out. Once there, he went to a corner cabinet, and from it produced a decanter. Pouring me out a stiff glass of brandy, he bade me drink it.

“You look as if you want it,” he said. And Heaven knows he was right.

“And now,” he said, when I had finished it, “if you will take my advice, you will lie down for an hour or two. For the convenience of our work, I have arranged that you shall occupy a room near me. This is it. Should I want you, I will ring a bell.”

The room to which he alluded adjoined his own, and was situated at the far end of the hall, the door, like those of the others I have described, being concealed behind a curtain. Never was permission to retire more willingly accepted, and within five minutes of leaving him I was in bed and asleep.

It must have been between ten and eleven o’clock in the forenoon when I retired; and the afternoon was well advanced before I woke again. Heavily as I slept, however, it had not been restful slumber. All things considered, I had much better have been waking.

Over and over again I saw the Dona Consuelo standing before me, just as she had done before Nikola that day; there was this difference, however — instead of asking to be allowed to remain with her great-grandfather, her prayer was that I should save both him and her from Nikola. While she pleaded to me, the faces of the terrible creatures I had seen in that room down the passage peered at us from all sorts of hiding-places. It was night, an hour or so before dawn. I had acceded to the Dona’s request, and was flying from the castle, carrying her in my arms.

At last, after I appeared to have been running for an eternity, we reached the shore, where I hoped to find a boat awaiting us. But not a sign of one was to be seen. While I waited day broke, and I placed my burden on the sand, only to

spring back from it with a cry of horror. It was not the Dona Consuelo I had been carrying, but one of those loathsome creatures I had seen in that terrible room. A fit of rage came over me, and I was about to wreak my vengeance on the unhappy idiot, when I woke. I looked about me at the somewhat sparsely furnished room, and some seconds elapsed before I realised where I was. Then the memory of our arrival at the castle, and of all that had happened since, returned to me. I shuddered, and had it not been for that poor girl, so lonely and friendless, I could have found it in my heart to wish myself back in London once more. Having dressed myself, I went out into the hall. Nikola was not there. I waited for some time, but as he did not put in an appearance I left the room and made my way down the corridor in the direction of the Dona Consuelo's sitting-room. Not able to get any answer when I knocked, I continued my walk, ascended another flight of stairs, and eventually found myself upon the battlements. A better place for observing the construction of the castle, and of obtaining a view of the surrounding country, could not have been desired. On one side I could look away across the moorland towards a distant range of hills, and on the other along the cliffs and across the wide expanse of sea. In the tiny bay to my right the yacht which had brought us from Newcastle lay at anchor; and had it not been for that and a column of grey smoke rising from a chimney, I might have believed myself to be living in a world of my own. For some time I stood watching the panorama spread out before me. I was still looking at it when a soft footfall sounded on the stones behind me. I turned to find Dona Consuelo approaching me. She was dressed entirely in black, and wore a lace mantilla over her shoulders.

"Thank Heaven, I have found you, Dr. Ingleby," she cried, as she hastened towards me. "I had begun to think myself deserted by everybody."

"Why should you do that?" I asked. "You know that could never be."

"I am certain of nothing now," she answered. "You cannot imagine what I have been through to-day."

"I am indeed sorry to hear you have been unhappy," I continued. "Is there any way in which I can be of service to you?"

"There are many ways, but I fear you would not employ them," she replied. "I am hungering to be with my great-grandfather again. Can you tell me why Dr. Nikola takes him away from me?"

"I fancied that he had told you," I answered; "but if it be any consolation to you, let me give you my assurance that he is tenderly cared for. His comfort is secured in every way; and from what Dr. Nikola has said to me, and from what I have seen myself, I feel convinced he will be able to do what he has promised and make your great-grandfather a hale and hearty man once more."

"It is all very well for him to say that," she said, "but why am I not permitted to be with him? If he needs nursing, who would be likely to wait upon him so devotedly as the woman who loves him? Surely Dr. Nikola cannot imagine his secret would be unsafe with me if he reveals it to you, a rival in his own profession?"

"It is not that at all," I answered. "I do not fancy Nikola has given a moment's consideration to the safety of his secret." Then, seeing the loophole of escape she presented to me, I added: "From what you know of him, I should have thought you would have understood that he has no great liking for your sex. To put it bluntly, Nikola is a woman-hater of the most determined order, and I fancy he would find it impossible to carry out his plans if you were in attendance upon the Don."

"Ah well! I suppose I must be content with your assurance," she said with a sigh.

"For the present, I am very much afraid so," I replied.

At this moment the old woman whom Nikola had appointed to wait upon us made her appearance, and informed the Dona that her dinner awaited her. About my own meals she knew nothing, so I concluded from this that I was to take them with Nikola in our own portion of the castle. Such proved to be the case; for when we reached the Dona Consuelo's apartments on the floor below, we met Nikola awaiting us in the corridor.

"I have been looking for you, Ingleby," he said, with a note of command in his voice. "You are quite ready for dinner, I have no doubt; and if you will accompany me, I think we shall find it waiting for us."

As may be supposed, I would rather have partaken of it with Dona Consuelo; but as it was not to be, I bade her good morning, and was about to follow Nikola along the corridor, when he stopped, and, turning to the girl, said:

"I can see from your face that you have been worrying about your grandfather. I assure you, you have not the least cause to do so; and I think Ingleby here, if he has not done so already, will bear me out in what I say. The old gentleman is doing excellently, and almost before you know he has been taken away from you, you will have him back again."

"I thank you for your news," she replied; but there was very little friendliness in her voice. "I would rather, however,

see him and convince myself of the fact." Then, bowing to us, she retired into her own apartments, while we made our way to the hall in search of our meal.

"To-morrow morning," said Nikola, as we drew our chairs up to the table, "we must commence work in earnest. After that for some weeks to come I am afraid you will see but little of your fair friend down yonder. You seem to be on excellent terms with one another."

As he said this he shot a keen glance at me, as though he were desirous of discovering what was passing in my mind. I was quite prepared for him, however, and answered in such an unconcerned way that I flattered myself, should he have got it into his head that there was anything more than mere friendship in our intimacy, he would be immediately disabused of the notion.

As he had predicted, the following morning saw the commencement of that gigantic struggle with the forces of Nature, upon the result of which Nikola had pinned so much faith and which was destined, so he affirmed, to revolutionise the world. The most exhaustive preparations had been made, the duration of our watches in the sick-room were duly apportioned, and a minute outline of the treatment proposed was propounded to me.

On entering the dark room in which the old Don lay, I discovered that the two bronze pedestals, the use of which had puzzled me so much on my first visit, had been moved near the bed, one been placed at its head and the other at its foot. These, as Nikola pointed out to me, were the terminals of an electric conductor for producing a constant current, which was to play without intermission a few feet above the patient's head. A peculiar and penetrating smell filled the room, which I had no difficulty in recognising as ozone, though Nikola's reason for using it in such a case was not at first apparent to me. The old Don himself lay just as we had left him the previous morning. His hands were by his sides; his eyes, as usual, were open, but saw nothing. It was not until I examined him closely that a slight respiratory movement was observable.

"When I am not here," said Nikola, "it must be your business to see that this electric current is kept continually playing above him. It must not be permitted for an instant to abate one unit of its strength." Then, pointing to an instrument fixed at the further wall, he continued: "Here is a volt meter, with the maximum and minimum points plainly marked upon it. Your record must also include temperature, which you will take on these dry and wet thermometers once every quarter of an hour. The currents of hot and cold air you can regulate by means of these handles. The temperature of the patient himself must be noted once in every hour, and should on no account be permitted to get higher or lower than it is at the present moment."

Taking a clinical thermometer from his pocket, he applied it, and, when he had noted the result, handed it to me.

"If it rises two points above that before the same hour three days hence, he will die — no skill can save him. If it drops, well, in eighty per cent, of cases, the result will be the same."

"And suppose I detect a tendency to rise?"

"In that case you must communicate instantly with me. Here is an electric button which will put you in touch with my room. I hope, however, that you will have no necessity to use it." Then, placing his hand upon my shoulder, he looked me full in the face. "Ingleby," he said, "you see how much trust I am placing in you. I tell you frankly, you have a great responsibility upon your shoulders. I am not going to beat about the bush with you. In this case there is no such thing as certainty. I have made the attempt three times before, and on each occasion my man has died simply through a moment's inattention on the part of my assistant. If the love of our science and a proper appreciation of the compliment I have paid you in asking you to share with me the honour of this great discovery do not weigh with you, think of the girl with whom you talked upon the battlements yesterday. You tried to make me believe that she was nothing to you. Some day, however, she may be. Remember what her grandfather's death would mean to her."

"You need have no fear," I replied. "I assure you, you can trust me implicitly."

"I do trust you," he answered. "Now let us get to work."

So saying, he crossed the room and opened a square box, heavily clamped with iron, from which he took two china pots of ointment. Then, disrobing the old man, we anointed him with the most scrupulous care from head to foot. This we did three times, after which the second curious apparatus I had seen standing in the corner was wheeled up to the bedside. That it was an electrical instrument of some sort was plain, but what its specific use was I could not even conjecture. Nikola, however, very soon enlightened me upon the matter. Taking a number of large velvet pads, each of which was

moulded to fit a definite portion of the human body, he placed them in position, attached the wires that connected them with the machine, and when all was ready turned on the current. At first no effect was observable. In about a minute and a half, however, if my memory serves me, the usual deathly pallor of the skin gave place to a faint blush, which presently increased until the skin exhibited a healthy glow; little by little the temporal veins, until then so prominent, gradually disappeared. In half an hour, during which the current had been slowly and very gradually increased, another dressing of both ointments was applied.

"Take this glass and examine his skin," said Nikola, whose eyes were gleaming with excitement, as he handed me a powerful magnifying glass. When I bent over the patient and did as he directed, it was indeed a wonderful thing that I beheld. An hour before the skin had been soft and hung in loose folds upon the bones, while the pressure of a finger upon it would not leave it for upwards of a minute. Now it had in a measure regained its youthful elasticity, and upon my softly pinching it between my fingers I found that it recovered its colour almost immediately.

"It is wonderful," I whispered. "Had I not seen it myself, I would never have believed it."

When it had been applied for an hour, the electric current was turned off and the pads removed.

"Now watch what happens very closely," said Nikola, "for, I assure you, the effect is curious."

Scarcely able to breathe by reason of my excitement, I watched, and as I did so I saw the flush of apparent health gradually decrease, the skin become white and loose once more, while the superficial veins rose into prominence upon the temples. I glanced at Nikola, thinking that some mistake must have occurred and that he would show signs of disappointment. This, however, he did not do.

"You surely did not imagine," he said, when I had questioned him upon the subject, "that the effect I produced would be permanent on the first application? No! we may hope to achieve a more lasting result in a fortnight's time, but not till then.

"Meanwhile, the effect must be produced in the same fashion every six hours, both day and night. Now give me those rugs; we must cover him carefully. In his present state the least draught would be fatal. Record the state of the volt meter, read your thermometers, and see that your ventilating apparatus is working properly. As I said just now, should you need me, remember the bell. One ring, when you have recorded your results, will inform me that all is progressing satisfactorily, while three will immediately bring me to your assistance. Do you understand?"

When I had assured him that I did, he left me. I accordingly switched off three of the electric lights, and sat myself down in a chair in semi-darkness, the centre of light being the patient on the bed. There was no fear of my feeling dull, for I had a great deal to think about. Taken altogether, the situation in which I found myself was as extraordinary as the most inveterate seeker after excitement could desire. Not a sound was to be heard. The stillness was that of the tomb, and yet I smiled to myself as I thought that, if Nikola's experiment achieved the result he expected of it, the simile was not an appropriate one, for it was not the silence of the tomb but of perpetual life itself. I looked at the figure on the bed before me, and tried to picture what the mystery he was unravelling would mean to mankind. It was a solemn thought. Should the experiment prove successful, how would it affect the world? Would it prove a blessing or a curse? But the thoughts it conjured up were too vast, the issues too great, and to attempt to solve them was only to lose oneself in the fields of wildest conjecture.

For four hours I remained on duty, noting all that occurred; reading my thermometers, regulating the hot and cold air apparatus, and at intervals signalling to Nikola that everything was progressing satisfactorily. When he relieved me, I retired to rest and slept like a top, too tired even to dream.

Of what happened during the fortnight following I have little to tell. Nikola and I watched by the bedside in turn, took our exercise upon the battlements, ate and slept with the regularity of automata. The life on one side was monotonous in the extreme; on the other it was filled with an unholy excitement that was the greater inasmuch as it had to be so carefully suppressed. To say that I was deeply interested in the work upon which I was engaged would be a by no means strong enough expression. The fire of enthusiasm, to which I have before alluded, was raging once more in my heart, and yet there had been little enough so far in the experiment to excite it. With that regularity which characterised the whole of our operations, we carried on the work I have described. Every sixth hour saw the skin tighten and become elastic, the hue of the flesh change from white to pink, the veins recede, and the hollows fill, only to return to their original state as soon as the electric current was withdrawn. Towards the end of the fortnight, however, there were not wanting signs to show that

the effect was gradually becoming more lasting. In place of doing so at once, the change to the original condition did not occur until some eight or ten minutes after the pads had been removed. And here I must remark that there was one other point in the case which struck me as peculiar. When I had first seen the old man, his finger-nails were of that pale yellow tint so often observable in the very old, now they were a delicate shade of pink; while his hair was, I felt convinced, a darker shade than it had been before. As Nikola was careful to point out, we had arrived at the most critical stage of the experiment. A mistake at this juncture, would not only undo all the work we had accomplished, but, what was more serious still, might very possibly cost us the life of the patient himself.

The night I am about to describe was at the end of the fourteenth day after our arrival at the castle. Nikola had been on watch from four o'clock in the afternoon until eight, when I relieved him.

"Do not let your eyes wander from him for a minute," he said, as I took my place beside the bed. "From certain symptoms I have noticed during the last few hours, I am convinced the crisis is close at hand. Should a rise in the temperature occur, summon me instantly. I shall be in the laboratory ready at a moment's notice to prepare the elixir upon which the success we hope to achieve depends."

"But you are worn out," I said, as I noticed the haggard expression upon his face. "Why don't you take some rest?"

"Rest!" he cried scornfully. "Is it likely that I could rest with such a discovery just coming within my grasp? No; you need not fear for me; I shall not break down. I have a constitution of iron."

Having once more warned me to advise him of any change that might occur, he left me; and when I had examined my instruments, attended to the electrical apparatus, and taken the patient's temperature, I sat down to the vigil to which I had by this time become accustomed. Hour by hour I followed the customary routine. My watch was early at an end. In twenty minutes it would be time for Nikola to relieve me. Leaning over the old man, I convinced myself that no change had taken place in his condition; his temperature was exactly what it had been throughout the preceding fortnight. I carefully wiped the clinical thermometer, and replaced it in its case. As I did so, I was startled by hearing a wild shriek in the hall outside. It was a woman's voice, and the accent was one of deadly terror. I should have recognised the voice anywhere: it was the Dona Consuelo's. What could have happened? Once more it rang out, and almost before I knew what I was doing I had rung the bell for Nikola, and had rushed from the room into the hall outside. No one was to be seen there. I ran in the direction of the corridor which led towards the Dona's own quarters, but she was not there! I returned and followed that leading towards that terrible room behind the iron gate. The passage was in semi-darkness, but there was still sufficient light for me to see a body lying upon the floor. As I thought, it was the Dona Consuelo, and she had fainted. Picking her up in my arms, I carried her to the hall, where the meal of which I was to partake at the end of my watch was already prepared. To bathe her forehead was the work of a moment. She revived almost immediately.

"What is the matter?" she asked faintly. "What has happened?" But before I could reply, the recollection of what she had seen returned to her. A look of abject terror came into her face.

"Save me, save me, Dr. Ingleby!" she cried, clinging to my arm like a frightened child. "If I see them again, I shall go mad. It will kill me. You don't know how frightened I have been."

I thought I was in a position to understand exactly.

“Hush!” I answered. “Try to think of something else. You are quite safe with me. Nothing shall harm you here.”

She covered her face with her hands, and her slender frame trembled under the violence of her emotion. Five minutes had elapsed before she was sufficiently recovered to tell me everything. For some days, as I soon discovered, she had been left almost entirely alone, and having nothing to occupy her mind, had been brooding over her enforced separation from her aged relative. The more she thought of him the more became her craving to see him, in order to convince herself that no harm had befallen him. A semi-hysterical condition must have ensued, for she rose from her bed, dressed herself, and, taking a candle in her hand, started in the hope of finding him. By some stroke of ill-fortune she must have discovered a passage leading to Ah-Win’s portion of the castle, and at last found herself standing before the open door of that demon-haunted room.

“What does it all mean?” she cried piteously “What is this place, and why are these dreadful things here?”

I was about to reply, when the curtain at the end of the hall, covering the door of the laboratory, was drawn aside, and to my horrified amazement Nikola, who I imagined had taken my place in the patient’s room, stood before us. As I saw him and realised the significance of the position, a cold sweat broke out upon my forehead. What construction would he be likely to place upon my presence there? For a few seconds he stood watching us, then an expression that I can only describe as being one of terror spread over his face.

“What does this mean?” he cried hoarsely. “What have you done?” Then running to the door of the Don’s room, he drew back the curtain and entered. Leaving the Dona where she was, I followed with such fear in my heart as I had never known before. I found Nikola fumbling with the case of the clinical thermometer, and trembling like a leaf as he did so. Thrusting it into the old man’s mouth, he hung over him and waited as if his whole life depended on the result. Withdrawing it again and holding it up to the light, he gazed at it.

“Too late!” he cried, and I scarcely recognised his voice, so changed was it. “His temperature has dropped a point! Ingleby, this is your doing. For all you know to the contrary, you may have killed him.”

CHAPTER 53. LOVE REIGNS

IN the preceding chapter I made you acquainted with the calamity which befell our patient, and of the serious position in which I found myself placed with Nikola in consequence. While knowing in my own heart that I was quite innocent of any intentional neglect of duty, I had yet to remember that had I remained on watch, instead of leaving the room to ascertain what had befallen the Dona Consuelo, it would in all probability never have happened. On the other hand, I had signalled Nikola and called him to my assistance before abandoning my charge. How it was he had not answered my summons was more than I could understand. As it transpired afterwards, however, and as is usual in such things, the explanation was a very simple one. In the last chapter I said that when he left me to go to the laboratory, he was quite exhausted; he had eaten nothing for many hours, and as a natural result the fumes of the herbs he was distilling had overpowered him and he had fallen in a dead faint upon the floor.

As long as I live I shall retain the recollection of the next fourteen hours. During the whole of that time Nikola and I fought death inch by inch for the body of the old Don. From midnight until the following afternoon, neither of us crossed the threshold of the sick-chamber; and during the whole of that time, save to give me brief directions, Nikola spoke no word to me at all. It was only when the mercury in the clinical thermometer was once more established on its accustomed mark that he addressed me. Rearranging the bed-covering and wiping his clammy forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, he turned to me.

"I think he will do now," he said, "provided he does not lose ground within the next half-hour, we may take it for granted that he is out of danger."

This was the opportunity for which I was waiting: I accordingly seized it.

"I am afraid, Dr. Nikola," I said, mustering courage as I progressed, "that you consider me to blame for what has happened." He looked sharply at me, and then said coldly:

"I fail to see how I could very well think otherwise. I left you in charge, and you deserted your post."

"But I assure you," I continued, "that you are misjudging me. I could not help myself. I heard the girl scream, and ran to her assistance. At the same time I took care to ring the bell for you before I left the room."

"You should not have left it at all until I had joined you," he answered, still in the same icy tone. "As a matter of fact, I did not hear your summons; I had fainted. And one other question, What was the girl doing in this portion of the castle?"

"She was hysterical," I answered, "and was searching for her great-grandfather. She did not know, herself, how she got here; but, as ill-luck would have it, she saw your terrible people, and was frightened nearly to death in consequence."

"For common humanity's sake I could not leave her as she was. Having rung for you, I naturally thought you were with the Don, and that I was free to render her what assistance I could."

"Your argument is certainly plausible; but supposing the man had died during your absence? How would you have felt then?"

"I should have regretted it all my life," I answered. "But surely you must admit that would have been better than that a young girl should have been driven mad by fear."

"You do not seem to understand," Nikola replied, "that I would willingly sacrifice a thousand girls to accomplish the great object I have in view. No! no! Ingleby, you have been found wanting in your duty; you have checked the progress of the experiment, and if that old man had died"—here he took a step towards me, and his face suddenly became livid with passion—"as I live at this moment you would never have seen the light of day again. I swear I would have killed you with as little compunction as I would have destroyed a dog who had bitten me."

So menacing was his attitude, and so fiendish the expression on his face, that I instinctively recoiled a step from him, and yet I don't think my worst enemy could accuse me of being a coward. Was the man a lunatic? I asked myself; had the magnitude of his discovery turned his head? If so, I must be careful in my dealings with him.

"I am afraid I do not understand you, Dr. Nikola," I said, trying to appear calmer than I felt. "You talk in an exaggerated fashion, and one which I cannot permit. I confess to being in a certain measure to blame for what has happened; but if you feel that you can no longer repose the trust in me that you once felt, I would rather resign my post

with you, and leave your house at once.”

For a moment I thought I had detected a sign of fear in his face. Then his manner changed completely.

“My dear Ingleby,” he said, patting me on the shoulder and speaking in quite a different tone, “we are wrangling like a pair of schoolboys. If I hurt your feelings just now, I hope you will forgive me and ascribe it to my anxiety. For the last two days, as you are aware, I have been overwrought. When I stated that I considered you to blame, I said more than I meant; for, of course, I know that you had no intention of injuring our patient, or of doing anything to prejudice the end we have in view. It was a combination of unfortunate circumstances, the ill-effects of which by good luck we have been able to remedy. Let us forget all about it.”

“With all my heart,” I said, with a momentary friendliness I had never felt for him before, and held out my hand to him. He took it, when to my surprise I found that his hand was as cold as ice. In this fashion the cloud between us appeared to have been blown away; but though it was no longer visible to the naked eye, it still existed, for I was unable to dispel from my mind the recollection of the threat he had used to me. If he were not in earnest now, he had at least been so then; and, for my own part, I put more faith in his threats than in his protestations of friendship.

“Come, come, this will never do,” said Nikola, after the few moments’ silence which had followed after our reconciliation. “It is nearly three o’clock. You had better go to your room and rest for a couple of hours, after which you can relieve me.”

Seeing his haggard and weary face, I offered to remain on duty while he went to lie down, but to this he would not consent. It was plain he was still brooding over what had happened, and that he did not intend to trust me any further than he was absolutely obliged. Accordingly, I did not press him; but, as soon as I had noted the various temperatures, and had done what I could to help him, I left him to his vigil and went to my own apartment. I had had nineteen hours in the sick-room, and in consequence was completely worn out. During that time I had heard nothing of the Dona Consuelo. But when I laid my head upon my pillow and closed my eyes, her terrified face, as I had seen it the previous night, rose before me. Even then I could feel the thrill which had run through me as I took that lovely body in my arms. What place was this terrible castle, I asked myself, for such a woman? How dreary was the life she was compelled to lead in it; without companions, and cut off from the one person who only a week before had been all her world to her. This suggested another and a sweeter thought to me. Was there only one person she loved? I remembered how she had clung to me in the hall, and how she had appealed to me to save her. The mere thought that there might be something more than simple liking in her attitude was sufficient to set my heart beating like a sledge-hammer. Was it possible I could be falling in love? I, who had thought myself done with that sort of thing for ever? I smiled at the idea. A nice sort of position I was in to contemplate such a thing. And yet I was so lonely in the world that it soothed me to think there might be some one to whom I was a little more than the average man, and that that some one was a beautiful and noble woman. With these thoughts in my brain I fell asleep. A moment later, so it seemed, the electric bell above my head brought me wide awake again. One glance at my watch was sufficient, however, to show me that I had been asleep two hours. I dressed as quickly as possible and returned to the Don’s room, when, much to my relief, Nikola informed me that there had been no relapse, and that all was progressing as satisfactorily as he could wish. Bidding me exercise the greatest vigilance, he left me and staggered from the room.

“A little more of this sort of thing, my friend,” I said to myself, as I watched him pass out of the door —“only a little more, and you will be unfit for anything.”

But I had yet to learn the strength of Nikola’s constitution. He was like a steel bow: he might often be bent, but never broken.

It was not until the following morning that I saw Dona Consuelo again. We met upon the battlements as usual.

“Dr. Ingleby,” she said, after we had been standing together some time, “I feel there is something I should say to you. I want to tell you how sorry I am for what occurred the other night. But for my folly in wandering about the castle as I did, I should not have seen”— she paused for a moment, and a shudder swept over her at the recollection. “I should not have seen what I did, and you would not have got into trouble with Dr. Nikola.”

“But how did you know that I did get into trouble with Nikola?” I asked.

“Because Dr. Nikola spoke to me about it,” she replied.

On hearing this, I pricked up my ears. Had Nikola taken her to task for what she had done?

In all probability he had blamed her. I tried to catch her on this point, but she would tell me nothing.

"You will accept my apology, won't you?" she asked; "it has made me so unhappy."

"You must not apologise to me at all," I answered; "I assure you none is needed. I would have given anything to have prevented your seeing — well, what you did, and still more to have prevented Nikola from speaking to you. He had no right to do so." Then, drawing a little closer to her, I took her hand: "Dona Consuelo," I said, "I am very much afraid your life here is a very unhappy one."

"I was happier in Spain," she answered. "But I do not want you to think that I am grumbling; you have given me your promise that no ill shall befall my great-grandfather, and for this reason I have no fear. If he is well, what right have I to complain of anything that may happen to myself? Some day perhaps Dr. Nikola will allow us to go back to Spain, and then I shall forget all about this terrible castle."

I wondered if the hope she entertained would ever be realised. But I was not going to permit her to suppose that I entertained any doubt at all about it. I felt I should like to have said more, but prudence restrained me. She looked so beautiful that the temptation was almost more than I could withstand. Whether she knew anything of what was in my mind, I cannot say; but somehow I fancied she must have done so, for, though I have no desire to appear conceited, I could not help thinking, when we bade each other goodbye, there was a look of sorrow in her face. Once more a fortnight went by. A month had now elapsed since our arrival at the castle, and, as I could plainly see, Nikola's experiment was at length achieving a definite result. The changes effected by the use of the electric batteries and the constant anointing which I have already described having ceased within a short time of the removal of the means by which they were occasioned, were now almost permanent, and were becoming more so every day. The patient's flesh was firmer and his skin was more elastic, while his usual pallor had given place to what might almost be described as a healthy tint. So far success had crowned Nikola's endeavours; but whether the final result would be what he desired was more than I could say. After the little *contretemps* which followed my mistake, already described, Nikola and I had agreed fairly well together. I was aware, however, that he was suspicious of my intimacy with the old Don's great-granddaughter; and from the way in which he glanced at the patient and the various instruments whenever he relieved me in the sick-room, I could tell that he was always anxious to satisfy himself that I had not done anything to prejudice the work he had in hand. It may easily be supposed therefore, that our partnership was far from being as pleasant as it had promised in London to be. To live in an atmosphere of continual suspicion is unpleasant at any time, but it becomes doubly so when another's happiness depends in a very large measure upon it. Of course, the reason was apparent to me; but there must have been something more in Nikola's mind than I could fathom, for I think I can assert most truthfully that never for a moment did I allow an effort to be wanting on my part to show how much I had his interest at heart. There was yet another thing which puzzled me. It was this: what was to happen when the required result had been achieved, and the old Don was transformed into a young man again? And more important still, what would become of his great-granddaughter? The whole thing seemed so absurd — so unnatural — if you like it better — that I could see no proper conclusion to it. Still, there was time to talk of that later on. The old Don was already, I am prepared to admit, in a certain sense, younger; that is to say, he did not present that appearance of great age which had been noticeable on board the *Dona Mercedes*; at the same time, he was still very far from being a young man.

One day I found sufficient courage to speak on this point to Nikola.

"That is one of the most remarkable points in my argument," he answered. "If he were to change his state so quickly, I should despair of success. As it is, I am more than hopeful, I am sanguine. To-morrow, if he continues to progress so favourably, we shall enter upon the third stage of the experiment. Granted that is successful, I shall be within measurable distance of the greatest medical discovery of this or any other century."

Knowing it was useless attempting to question him further, I was compelled to possess my soul in patience until the time should arrive for him to enlighten me. The following morning, as soon as I had finished my period of duty in the Don's chamber, I informed Nikola of my intention of going for a short stroll. The time, he had decided, was not ripe yet for the third phase; and as I knew that I should be kept closely employed as soon as it was, I was anxious to obtain as much exercise as possible while I had the opportunity. Accordingly, I placed my hat upon my head and descended to the courtyard. Strangely enough it was the first time I had set foot in it since our arrival at the castle. It was an exquisite morning for walking, and the sky was blue overhead, a brisk breeze was blowing, and when I had crossed the drawbridge and looked down into the little bay where the waves rolled in and broke with a noise like thunder upon the beach, I felt

happier than I had done for some considerable time past. I watched the white gulls wheeling above my head, and as I did so the recollection of the time when I had last seen them rose before my mind's eye. It was the day that I had come so near speaking words of love to Dona Consuelo upon the battlements. I remembered the look I had seen on her sweet face, and as I did so I realised how much she was to me. With a light step and a feeling of elation in my heart, I made my way down the path towards the beach. Not a soul was to be seen, for I remembered having heard Nikola say that the yacht had gone south for stores. Reaching the water's edge, I stood and looked back at the castle. It was a sombre enough place in all conscience, and yet there was something about it now which affected me in a manner I can scarce describe. I looked at it for a few moments, and then, turning my back upon it, I set off along the beach at a brisk pace, whistling gaily as I went. Eventually I reached the further side of the bay, opposite that on which the castle was situated. Here the sand gave place to large rocks, which in their turn terminated in a tall headland. The view from these rocks was grand in the extreme. Night and day the rollers of the North Sea broke upon them, throwing showers of spray high into the air. Clambering up, I struggled for fifty yards or so, and finally seating myself upon a rock somewhat larger than the rest, prepared to enjoy the view. A surprise was in store for me. Looking back upon the way I had come, I caught sight of a figure walking towards me on the sands. Needless to say, it was the Dona Consuelo. Whether she was aware of my presence upon the rocks, I cannot say; I only know that as soon as I saw her I rose from where I was sitting and hastened to meet her. How beautiful she looked, and how her face lighted up as I came closer, are things which I must leave to the imagination of my reader.

"You are further abroad than usual to-day, are you not?" I said, as we shook hands.

"Might I not say the same of you?" she answered with a smile. "The morning was so beautiful that I could not remain in that terrible old building. Every corner seems to suggest unhappy memories to me."

"Do you really think all the memories connected with it will be unpleasant?" I inquired.

She looked up at me in a little startled way, and blushed divinely as she did so.

"Could you expect me to regard the time I have spent in it with any sort of pleasure?" she inquired, fencing with my meaning, and giving me a Roland for an Oliver. "Only think what I have suffered in it!"

By this time we were strolling back together towards the rocks I have already described. The beach at this point narrowed considerably, and for some reason or another we walked a little nearer the cliff than I had done. Suddenly my companion stopped, and, pointing to the sand, said:

“You had a companion this morning?”

“I? I had no companion,” I answered. “What makes you think so?”

“Look here,” she said, and as she spoke she pointed to some footmarks on the sand before us.

“As you went up the beach you walked near the water’s edge, and as you came to meet me you passed midway between your former tracks and the cliff. If you did not have a companion, whose footprints are these? They must have been made this morning, for, as you are aware, when the tide is full, it comes right up to the cliffs, and would be certain to wash out anything that existed before.”

I stooped and examined the tracks carefully before I answered. They were evidently those of a man, and from the fact that the sand was hard the outline could be plainly distinguished. The foot that was responsible for them was a large one, and must have been clad in an exceedingly clumsy boot.

“I don’t know what to think of it,” I said. “One thing, however, is quite certain: I had no companion this morning. What about the old man and his wife at the castle?”

“I happen to know that they have both been hard at work all the morning,” she answered. “Besides, what object could they have in following you? The beach leads nowhere, and from here to yonder point there is no place where you can reach the land above.”

I shook my head. The problem was too much for me. At the same time I must own it disquieted me strangely. Who was this mysterious person who had dogged my footsteps? and what could have been his object in following me? For a moment I inclined to the belief that it might have been Dr. Nikola, who was anxious to discover how I spent my leisure. But on second thoughts the absurdity of the idea became apparent to me. But if it were not Nikola, who could it have been?

On reaching the rocks we seated ourselves, and fell to criticising the picture spread out before our gaze. There was something in my companion’s manner this morning which, analyse it as I would, I could not understand. She was by turns light-hearted and sad; the two expressions chased each other across her face like clouds across an April sky. At last she returned to the topic which I knew must come sooner or later — that of her great-grandfather’s condition.

"I seem cut off from him for ever," she said with infinite sadness. "I hear nothing of him from week's end to week's end, and I see nothing of him. He is gone completely out of my life."

"But only for the time being," I answered. "Dr. Nikola has assured you that he will restore him to health and strength. Think what that will mean, and how happy you will be together then."

"I know it is very wrong of me to say so," she continued; "but I cannot keep it back, Dr. Ingleby — I distrust Dr. Nikola. He is deceiving me; of that I feel sure."

Knowing what I did, I could not contradict her; but I saw my opportunity, and acted upon it.

"But if you do not trust Dr. Nikola," I said, "am I to suppose that you do not trust me?"

She was silent, and I noticed that she turned her face away from me, as if she were anxious to study the castle and the cliff. What was more, I noticed that her hand trembled a little as it rested on the rock beside me.

Once more I put the question, and as I did so, I leant a little towards her.

"I do trust you," she answered, but so softly that I could scarcely hear it.

"Consuelo," I said, in a voice but little louder than that in which she had addressed me, "you cannot think what happiness it is to me to hear you say that. As I have tried to show you, there is nothing I would not do to prove how anxious I am to be worthy of your trust. We have known each other but little longer than a month. In that time, however, I have learnt to know you as well as any man could know a woman. I have learnt more than that, Consuelo; I have learnt to love you better than life itself."

"No, no," she answered, "you must not say that. I cannot hear you."

"But it must be said," I answered. "My love will not be denied. You do love me, Consuelo; I can see it in your face. Don't you think that I watched and longed for it?"

Instead of turning her face to me, she turned it still further from me.

I took her little hand in mine.

"What is your answer, Consuelo?" I asked. "Be brave and tell me, darling."

"If I were brave," she said, "I should tell you that what you ask must never be. That it is hopeless — impossible. That it would be madness for us to think of such a thing. But I am not brave. I am so lonely in the world, and have lost so much that I cannot lose you also."

"Then you love me!" I cried, in such triumph as I had never felt for anything else in my life before. "Thank God, thank God for that!"

"Yes, I love you," she answered; and the great waves breaking on the rocks seemed to echo the happiness we both were feeling.

Over the next half-hour I must draw a veil. By the end of that time it was necessary for me to think of returning to the castle. Nikola's watch would be up in an hour, and I knew it would not do for me to keep him waiting. I said as much to Consuelo, and we immediately rose and set out on our return. As I walked beside her, I would not have changed position with any living man, so happy was I. My peace of mind, however, was destined to be but short-lived. We had crossed the greater number of the rocks, and were approaching the sand once more, when I received a shock which I shall not forget as long as I can remember anything. Clambering over the sharp and slippery rocks was by no means an easy business. It was, however, delightful to hold my sweetheart's hand in the pretence of assisting her. Occasionally it became necessary for us to make considerable detours, and once I bade her remain where she was until I had climbed a somewhat bigger rock than usual in order to find out whether we could proceed that way. I had reached the top, and was about to extend my hand to her assistance, when something caused me to look behind me. Judge of my surprise and consternation at finding, in the hollow below me, a man crouching on the sand, watching me.

It was the Chinaman I had seen on board the Dona Mercedes, the man who had thrown the knife which had so nearly terminated Nikola's existence.

How I managed to retain my presence of mind at that trying moment, I find it difficult now to understand. I only know this, that I realised in a flash the fact that it would be madness to pretend to have seen him. Accordingly, I stood for a moment looking out to sea, and then with a laugh that must have sounded far from natural, I rejoined Consuelo on the rock below and chose another path towards the sands.

"What is the matter?" she inquired when we had proceeded a short distance. "Your face is quite pale."

"I did not feel very well for a moment," I answered, making use of the first excuse that occurred to me.

"I am afraid you are not telling me the truth," she answered. "I feel convinced something has frightened you. Can you not trust me?"

Under the circumstances I thought it would be better for me to make a clean breast of it.

"I will trust you," I answered. "The fact of the matter is, I have discovered an explanation for the footsteps you pointed out to me upon the beach. We are being followed. When I jumped on the top of that rock, I found a man lying on the other side of it."

"A man? Who could he have been, and why should he be spying upon us? Did you recognise him?"

"Perfectly; I should have known him anywhere."

"Then who was he?"

"The Chinaman we saw on board the steamer. The man who stole the drugs Nikola entrusted to my care."

"Do you mean the man who entered my cabin and bent over to look at me?" she cried in alarm.

I nodded, and threw a quick glance back over my shoulder to discover whether we were still being followed. I could see nothing, however, of the man; a circumstance which by no means allayed my anxiety.

"What do you think we had better do?" inquired Consuelo.

"Hasten home as fast as we can go, and tell Nikola," I answered. "It is imperative he should know at once."

We accordingly continued our walk at increased speed, every now and then throwing apprehensive glances behind us. It is possible some of my readers *may* regard it as an exhibition of cowardice on my part to have sought refuge in flight; but when all the circumstances connected with it are taken into consideration, I am sure every fair-minded person will acquit me of this charge. Had I been alone, it is possible I might have turned and risked an encounter with the man; but Consuelo being with me rendered such a course impossible. For the first time since we had known it, the grim old castle, perched up on the cliffs, seemed a desirable place, and it was with a feeling of profound relief that I led my sweetheart across the

drawbridge, and was able to tell myself that, for the time being at least, she was safe. On reaching the hall, I found that I had still twenty minutes to spare. I had no desire, however, for further leisure. What I wanted was to see Nikola at once, in order to tell him my unpalatable news.

On entering the room, I found him engaged in taking the old man's temperature. He looked up at me as if he were surprised to see me return so soon, but said nothing until he had finished the work upon which he was engaged.

"I can see from your face that you have had a fright, and that you have something to say to me concerning it," he began, when he had returned the thermometer to its case. "Our friend Quong Ma has turned up again, I suppose?"

"How did you know it?" I asked: for I had no idea that he was aware of the man's appearance in the neighbourhood.

"I guessed it," he answered, with one of his peculiar smiles. "You are the possessor of a most expressive countenance. Consider for a moment, and you will understand how it is I am able to arrive at a conclusion so quickly. In the first place, you have been for a walk with the young lady whom you love and who loves you in return."

"Perhaps you saw me," I replied sharply, feeling myself blushing to the roots of my hair.

"I have not left this room," he answered. "There is a long black hair on your collar, which would not have been there if you had spent your liberty by yourself. The same thing tells me that you love her, and she loves you. As for the other matter, the caretaker and his wife have been busily employed in the castle all the morning, while Ah-Win never leaves his own portion of the premises. There is only one person outside the walls who could have put that expression into your face, and that person is Quong Ma. Am I right?"

"Quite right," I replied. "He followed me along the sands, and hid himself among the rocks. In recrossing them from the point, I, as nearly as possible, jumped on him."

"I am very glad you did not quite do so," he answered. "Had you experienced that misfortune, you would not have been here to tell the tale. But enough of him for the present. Take your place here and watch our patient. In an hour's time his temperature should have risen two points. When it has done so, give him ten drops of this fluid in twenty drops of distilled water. A profuse perspiration should result, which will herald the return of consciousness and the new life. In twenty-four hours he should not only be conscious, but on his way to the commencement of his second youth; in forty-eight the improvement should be firmly established; while in a week we should have him on his legs, a living, moving, thinking man, and of my own creation. Watch him, therefore, and whatever happens do not leave this room. Meanwhile, I will have the drawbridge raised, and if Quong Ma can leap the chasm, and make his way into the castle, well, all I can say is, he is a cleverer man than I take him to be."

With that, Nikola left me, and I sat down to watch beside the aged Don. Apart from my duty towards him, I had plenty to think about, and over and over again I found myself recalling the incidents of the morning. Consuelo loved me, and happen what might I would prove myself worthy of her love. At the end of the hour, as Nikola had predicted, the patient's temperature had risen two points. I accordingly measured out the stipulated quantity of the medicine he had placed in readiness for me, added the necessary quantity of water, and poured it into the old man's mouth. Then I sat myself down to wait. Slowly the hands of the clock upon the wall went round, and sixty minutes later, just as Nikola had prophesied, small beads of perspiration made their appearance upon his forehead. It was an exciting moment, and one for which we had been eagerly waiting. I immediately rang the bell for Nikola, and upon his arrival informed him of the fact.

"At last, at last," he whispered. "It is certain now that I have made no mistake. From this moment forward his progress should be assured. In a week you will be rewarded by a sight such as the eye of man has never yet seen. Be faithful to me, Ingleby, and I pledge my word your future with the woman you love is assured."

For the remainder of that day, and, indeed, until eleven o'clock on the morning following, there was but little change in the old Don's condition. The casual observer would have seen but little difference from the day on which I had first taken charge of him on board the steamer. To Nikola and myself, however, who had spent so much time with him, and who had noted every change, there was a difference so vast that it seemed almost incomprehensible.

My watch next morning was from four o'clock until eight. At eight I breakfasted, and afterwards repaired to the battlements above in the hope of meeting Consuelo. Since Nikola had ordered the drawbridge to be raised, we had been compelled to make this our meeting-place, and, as it happened, Consuelo was first at the rendezvous.

"You have good news for me!" she cried, after I had kissed her. "I can see it in your face. What is it? Does it concern my great-grandfather?"

"It does," I answered. "It concerns him inasmuch as I am able to tell you that what Nikola promised you should happen has in reality come to pass. Everything has been satisfactory beyond our wildest hopes."

"And do you mean that all need of anxiety is over?" she cried.

"I do not mean that exactly," I answered. "But I think it very possible we shall soon be able to say so. Nikola is certainly the most wonderful man upon this earth."

What she said in reply it would be vanity on my part to recall, and would be only another instance of the folly of lovers' talk. Let it suffice that for upwards of an hour our converse was of the sweetest description. Hand in hand we sat upon the battlements, looking out across the sunlit sea, and building our castles in the air. We were interrupted by Ah-Win, who suddenly made his appearance before us and beckoned me to follow him.

Bidding Consuelo good-bye, I followed the fellow to the hall, where he pointed to the old Don's room and left me. I found Nikola in a state of the wildest excitement.

"I sent for you because the crisis is close at hand," he whispered. "At any moment now I may know my fate. Little by little I have built up this worn-out frame, strengthening, renewing, revivifying, and now the object of my ambition is almost achieved. A thousand years ago the secret was guessed by a certain secret sect in Asia. After working a hundred years or more upon it they at length perfected it. But by the law of their order only one man was permitted to derive any benefit from it. I obtained their secret — how it does not matter, added to it what I thought it lacked, and here is the result."

As he spoke a visible tremor ran over the form on the bed before us. The excitement was well-nigh unbearable. For the first time in more than thirty days, movement was to be detected, the eyelids flickered, the mouth twitched, and little by little the eyes opened. Nikola immediately stooped over him, and concentrated all his attention upon the pupils. Then, placing his fingertips so close that they almost touched the lashes, he drew them away again in long transverse passes.

"Do you know me?" he asked, in a voice that shook with emotion. Almost instantly the man replied:

"I know you."

"Do you suffer any pain?"

"I do not."

"Sleep then, rest and gain strength, and in two days from this hour wake again a strong man."

Once more he placed his hands before the patient's eyes, and as he drew them away the lids closed. Nikola bent over him and listened, and when he rose he nodded reassuringly to me.

"It is all right," he said. "His respiration is as even and unbroken as that of a sleeping child."

As usual, my watch that night was from eight o'clock until midnight. From the fact that Don Miguel continued to sleep

as quietly as at the moment when Nikola had hypnotised him, it was neither as difficult nor as anxious as before. Nor was I altogether discontented with my lot. I was in love, and was loved in my turn; I was engaged in deeply interesting employment, which, should the experiment terminate successfully, would in all probability ensure my being able to start for a second time in my profession, and with an added knowledge that would bring me to the top of the tree at once. The room in which I sat was warm and comfortable; outside, however, a violent storm was raging. The rain and wind beat against the window in the hall with wildest fury. Now, ever since I had watched by the Don's bedside, I had made it my habit to carefully lock the door as soon as Nikola had left the room. On this particular occasion I had not departed from my custom. The hands of the clock on the wall stood at ten minutes past eleven, and I was reflecting that I should not be sorry when my watch was over, and I at liberty to retire to bed, when to my astonishment I saw the handle of the door slowly turn. At first I almost believed that my imagination was playing me a trick; but when the handle revolved and was afterwards turned again, I was satisfied that this was not the case. Who was the person on the other side? It would not be Ah-Win, for the reason that he had been particularly instructed on no account ever to touch the door; Consuelo would not venture into that portion of the castle again on any consideration whatsoever; while Nikola himself, being aware that I always kept it locked, would have knocked before attempting to enter. Whoever it was must have been satisfied that the task was a hopeless one. At any rate he desisted, and I heard no more of him. A few moments later the ventilator required my attention, and I was too busy to bestow any more thought upon the matter. Indeed, it was not until Nikola knocked upon the door and relieved me that it entered my mind again. It became apparent immediately that he attached more importance to the incident than I was inclined to do.

"It's very strange," he said, "but it accounts for one thing which I must confess has puzzled me."

"What is that?" I inquired.

"I will show you," he answered, and led the way to the hall. At the farther end, near the window, he paused and pointed to a mark upon the floor. Not being able to see it very distinctly, I went down upon my hands and knees.

"Do you know what it is?" asked Nikola.

"I do," I answered. "It is the print of a naked foot."

"Yes," said Nikola, "and that foot was wet. It was more than that." Here he took a magnifying glass from his pocket, and also went down upon his hands and knees. "The chimney leading from Ah-Win's room," he said, "is almost exactly above our heads. In consequence, as you may have noticed, the battlements at that point are invariably covered with smuts. The naked foot which made this mark brought some of these particles with it, which tells us that there was only one way in which the owner could have come, and that was down a rope and through the window. Let us examine the window."

We did so, but, so far as I could see, there was nothing there to reward us. The rain was pelting down, and the wind blew as I had never heard it do before.

"The man, whoever he was, was certainly not deficient in pluck," said Nikola. "I shouldn't have called to lower myself over the battlements on a night like this."

"Are you sure that he did so lower himself?" I inquired.

"I am quite sure," Nikola answered. "How else could he have come? The old Don is safe for half an hour at least; get your revolver, I will get mine, and we will go upstairs in search of the intruder."

I did as he directed, but with no great willingness. As you may suppose, I was quite convinced as to the identity of the mysterious visitor; and knowing his proficiency in the art of knife-throwing, I had not the smallest desire to become better acquainted with him. However, I was not going to allow Nikola to think I was afraid; so, putting the best face I could upon it, I did as he directed, and having assured myself that my weapon was loaded in every chamber, followed him along the corridor, up the stone staircase, and so out on to the battlements above. Of all the storms in my experience, I think that particular one was certainly the worst. The rain beat in our faces, and so great was the strength of the wind that the very castle itself seemed to shake and tremble before it. Revolver in hand, expecting every moment to be confronted by the man of whom we were in search, I followed Nikola in the direction of the engine-room chimney. I knew very well for what he was looking. He thought he would find a rope there, but in this he was disappointed. Nor were we able to discover any traces of human beings. We searched the whole length of the battlements in vain, and at last were perforce compelled to give up the hunt as hopeless. Returning to the stairway once more, we were about to descend, when I saw Nikola stoop and pick something up. Whatever it was, he said nothing to me until we had reached the light of the corridor below. Then he

held it up for me to see. It was a grey felt hat, the same that I had seen upon the Chinaman's head that morning.

"Mark my words," said Nikola, "we shall have trouble with Quong Ma before very long."



CHAPTER 54. THE RESULT OF THE EXPERIMENT

WHEN we had returned to the corridor below the battlements, after our search for the man who had lowered himself down to the window of the hall, Nikola brought with him the soft felt hat I had observed upon the head of that villainous Chinaman, Quong Ma, that morning. Though neither of us was altogether surprised at finding that he was the man we suspected of being in the castle, we were none the more pleased at having our suspicions confirmed. The thing which puzzled us most, however, was how he had obtained admission, seeing that he had not been in sight when I had entered the castle that morning, that I had informed Nikola of my meeting with him within five minutes of my arrival, and that the drawbridge had been raised, if not at once, certainly within a quarter of an hour of my making my report. And yet it was plain, since he had been upon the battlements, that he *was* in the castle, and that his being there boded no good was as apparent as his presence.

"I always knew they had original ideas," said Nikola, "but I had no idea they were as clever as this. We shall have to be very careful what we do for the future; for from what I know of them, they would stick at nothing. To-morrow morning we must search the castle from dungeon to turret."

"And if we find them?"

"In that case," said Nikola, "I fancy I know a way of dealing with them. Dona Consuelo locks her door at night, I suppose?"

I informed him that I had advised her to do so.

"It would be better that we should make certain," he answered, and, proceeding to the door in question, he softly turned the handle. It was securely fastened from the inside.

"It seems all right," said Nikola. "Now we will return to our own quarters, and make everything secure there."

We did as suggested, and when everything was made fast, securely locked the door in the corridor behind us. Reaching the hall once more, we made a careful survey of the various rooms, including not only the apartments leading out of it, but also the passage leading to Ah-Win's quarters. No sign, however, of the man we wanted was to be seen there. Returning to the hall, we assured ourselves that our patient was still sleeping quietly, and then I bade Nikola good-night, and prepared to go to my room.

"I should advise you to lock your door," he said, as we parted. "You cannot take too many precautions when Quong Ma and his companion are about. Should I require your assistance during the night, I will ring for you."

I promised to answer his call immediately, and was about to turn away, when it occurred to me to ask him a question to which he had promised me an answer upwards of a month before.

"On the night that we left Newcastle," I said, "you were kind enough to say that when a fitting opportunity occurred you would tell me what has induced these men to follow you as they are doing."

"There is no reason why you should not hear," Nikola replied. "To tell it in full, however, would be too long a story, but I will briefly summarise it for you. In order to obtain the information necessary for carrying out the experiment upon which we are now engaged, I penetrated, as I think I have already informed you, into a certain monastery situated in the least known portion of Thibet. My companion and I carried our lives in our hands if ever men have done so in the history of the world. The better to carry out my scheme, I might explain, I impersonated a high official who had lately been elected one of the rulers of the order. At a most unfortunate moment the fraud was discovered, and my companion and I were ordered to be hurled from the roof of the monastery into the precipice below. We managed to escape, however, but not before I had secured the precious secret for which I had risked so much. The monks traced us on our journey back to civilisation, and two of the order, who have had special experience in this sort of work, were detailed to follow us, in the hope that they might not only regain possession of a book which contained the secret, but at the same time revenge the insult which had been offered to them."

"And you still have that book?"

"Would you care to see it?" asked Nikola.

I replied that I should like to immensely, whereupon he retired to his own apartment, to presently return bringing

with him a small packet, which he placed upon the table. Untying the string which bound it, and removing a sheet of thin leather, he exposed to my gaze a small book, possibly eight inches long by four wide. The materials in which it was bound were almost dropping apart with age; the backs and corners, however, were clamped with rusty iron. The interior was filled with writing in the Sanskrit character, a great deal of which had faded and was barely decipherable. I took it tenderly in my hands.

“And it is to regain possession of this book that these men are following you?” I asked.

“To do that,” he answered, “and to punish me for the trick I played them. They have not, however, accomplished their task yet; nor shall they do so if I can help it. Let me once get hold of Quong Ma, and he’ll do no more mischief for some time to come.”

As Nikola said this, his great cat, which for the past few moments had been sitting upon his knees, suddenly stood up, and, placing its forepaws upon the table, scratched at the cloth. Nikola was watching my face, and what he saw there must have considerably amused him.

“You are thinking that Apollyon and I are not unlike. When we get out our claws, we are dangerous. It would be well for our Chinese friend if he understood as much. Now you had better be off to bed, and I to my watch.”

When Nikola relieved me at eight o’clock the morning following, it was plain that there was something important toward.

“Get your breakfast as soon as you can,” he said, “and when you have done we will search the castle. You heard nothing suspicious during your watch, I suppose?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “Everything has gone on just as usual.”

As soon as I had finished my breakfast, Ah-Win was summoned, and together we set off on our errand. Beginning with the battlements, we took the castle corridor by corridor, floor by floor, examining every corner and staircase in which it would be possible for a human being to hide himself. Having exhausted the inhabited portion of the building, we searched the rooms into which no one had penetrated from year’s end to year’s end. These we also drew blank. Then descending another flight of stairs, we reached the basement, explored the great kitchens, once so busy, and now tenanted only by rats and beetles, and examined the various domestic offices, including the buttery and armoury, still without success. If Quong Ma was in the castle, it looked as if he must certainly possess the power of rendering himself invisible at will. At last we reached the keep, where the old couple who, as Nikola had said, officiated as caretakers during his absence, had their quarters. At the moment of our arrival the woman was bitterly upbraiding her husband for some misdeed.

“I tell ‘ee,” she was saying, slapping the table with her hand to emphasise her words, “that when I went to bed last night they vittals was in yonder cupboard. What I want ‘ee to say is where they be now? Don’t ‘ee say ‘ee never saw them, or that it was the cat as stole ‘em, for ‘ee may talk till ‘ee be black in the face and I’ll not believe ‘ee. Cats don’t turn handles and undo latches, and mutton don’t walk out of the front door on its own leg. If ‘ee be a man, ‘ee’ll tell the truth an’ shame the devil.”

I must leave you to picture for yourself the vehemence with which all this was said. The words poured from her mouth in a torrent, and every sentence was punctuated with slaps upon the table. So engaged were they in their quarrel that some moments elapsed before they perceived Nikola and myself standing in the doorway. When they did, the tumult ceased as if by magic.

“You seem to be enjoying yourselves,” said Nikola drily; “perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me what it is all about.”

He had no sooner finished than the irate old lady recommenced.

“It’s just this way, my lord,” she said, though why she should have bestowed a title upon Nikola I could not understand. “Last night I was troubled with the rheumatiz mortal bad, and went to bed early. My old man there, beggin’ your pardon for the liberty I’m takin’, was a-sittin’ by the fire smokin’ his pipe, such bein’ his custom of an evening. He had had his supper, and as I se’d with my own eyes when he’d a finished there was the end of a leg of mutton in yon cupboard. When I comes this mornin’ to take it out for breakfast, *it’s* gone, and with it the bread as I baked with my own hands but yesterday. And he stands there, savin’ your presence, my lord, and wants I for to believe as how he’s not touched it, and the latch of the cupboard down, as you can see for yourselves, honourable gentlemen both, with your own eyes. I’ve been married these three-and-forty years, and I don’t know as how you will believe it, my lord —”

Seeing that she was getting up steam once more, Nikola held up his hand to her to be silent.

"What you tell me is very interesting," he said, fixing his dark eyes upon her; "but let me understand you properly. You say you went to bed leaving your husband smoking his pipe in this room. Before retiring you convinced yourself that the food which is now not forthcoming was in the cupboard. Is that so?"

"Yes, my lord, and honourable gentlemen both."

Then, addressing her husband, Nikola continued:

"I suppose you went to sleep over your pipe?" The question had to be repeated, and his wife had to admonish him with, "Speak up to his lordship like a man," before he could answer. Even then his reply was scarcely satisfactory; he thought he might have fallen asleep, but he was not at all sure upon the point. He admitted he was in the habit of doing so; and, as far as Nikola was concerned, this settled the matter.

"Quong Ma," he said, turning to me. "Now I understand where he gets his food from." Then, turning to the woman, he said, "Your husband is a heavy sleeper, I suppose?"

"Why, bless you, sir," she replied, "he sleeps that heavy you can't wake him. And, as for snoring, why, the rattling of that old bridge out yonder, when they're a-drawin' of it up, ain't to be compared with him, as the sayin' is. I did hear of a man, when I lived down Sunderland, as did snore so that, when he woke up, the folks next door sent in to ask him to go on again, the stillness bein' that lonesome that they couldn't bear it."

Nikola peremptorily bade the old woman be silent, and ordered her for the future to see that her door was locked at dusk every evening. Then, addressing her husband, he inquired if the latter was conversant with the subterranean passages of the castle, and when he had replied in the affirmative, bade him light a lantern, and show us all he could. The man did so, and having conducted us across the courtyard, entered a long, low chamber, which might once have been used as a bakehouse. In this was a large wooden door, secured with many bolts, but now falling into considerable disrepair. These bolts he drew one by one with an air of importance that was indescribably comic.

"I don't quite understand how these bolts come to be fastened if the man is down below," said Nikola, addressing me. I shook my head, whereupon he bade the old man inform him whether there were any other entrances to the vaults in question.

"Lor', sir," the man replied, "the castle be fair mazed with them. If 'ee likes, I can take 'ee into most any room in the place from down below."

"I should have thought of that," said Nikola, more to himself than to me. "I am sorry I didn't question our friend here before. Quong Ma has evidently mastered the situation, and is playing a game of hide-and-seek. However, we'll examine the dungeons first, and the passages afterwards. So lead the way, my friend."

The old man going ahead carrying the lantern, Nikola following, and Ah-Win and myself bringing up the rear, we made our way down the clammy stone staircase into the subterranean portion of the castle. It was an experience that would have been worth anything to a novelist seeking colour for a historical tale; but knowing what I did about the man we were after, I cannot say that I appreciated the incident so much. In addition to my nervousness, my head was aching, while hot and cold perspirations alternately contributed to my general discomfort. What was the matter with me I could not think. As it was, I was the only member **of** the party, I believe, who felt any symptoms of fright. The old man with the lantern knew nothing of his danger. Ah-Win was an Asiatic and a fatalist, and in his master's presence appeared not to care whom or what he faced; while, as for Nikola himself, I believe most implicitly that cold-blooded individual would have faced certain death as coolly and contentedly as he would have tossed off a glass of wine. Lower and lower we descended, glancing into dungeons into which no light of day had ever penetrated, and stooping to make our way along passages in which the moisture from the roof fell drip, drip, drip, upon our heads. Search as we would, however, we could discover no trace of that villainous Celestial.

"We be close down alongside the sea now, your lordship," said the old man, "and when I tells 'ee that, I tells 'ee summat as not many folks as has bided in this 'ere castle ever knowed."

"Most admirable of men," said Nikola, "you are telling me exactly what I want to know. Do you mean that it's possible for us to reach the sea from where we are now standing without crossing the drawbridge?"

"That is exactly what I *do* mean, my lord," he answered. "And if your lordship and the honourable gentleman will come wi' I, I'll let 'ee see for your own selves."

Forthwith the old fellow, holding his lantern aloft, turned down a narrow passage, leading to the right, and a few minutes later brought us up to some steps, at the bottom of which the light of day could be plainly seen. To reach the bottom of the steps was the work of a moment, and once there a curious scene was revealed to us. The doorway opened into the chasm which I have described earlier, and was situated almost directly beneath the drawbridge and the keep. Kneeling down, Nikola and I looked over the edge and could plainly see a number of iron steps let into the rock one above the other. At the bottom — for it was now full tide — the sea washed and dashed with terrific force. Rising to his feet again, Nikola addressed the old man.

“Is it possible at low tide,” he said, “to reach the sands from here?”

“Lor’ bless you, yes, sir,” the man replied. “When the tide is down, ‘ee can get along from rock to rock without as much as wetting shoe leather.”

“That accounts for everything,” said Nikola with considerable satisfaction. “I understand exactly how Quong Ma got into the castle now; he must have laughed to himself when he saw that we had raised the drawbridge in the hope of keeping him out. However, forewarned is forearmed, and this place shall be bricked up this morning. You, my old friend, had better see to it, and be sure that you make a good job of it”

The man promised to do so, and seeing that there was nothing further to be gained by remaining where we were, Nikola bade him conduct us back again to our own portion of the building by a secret passage if possible. The man assured us that he could do so, and was as good as his word. We climbed, crawled, and scrambled our way up the narrow steps and along a rabbit warren of a small passage behind our guide. At last he stopped.

“Would your lordship be kind enough to say where ‘ee think ‘ee are now?” he added.

“I have not the least notion,” said Nikola.

“Nor I,” I added.

“Well, sir, I will show ‘ee,” said the man, and after a little hunting he found and pressed something in the wall. There was a grating noise, a sound as of rusty hinges being slowly unfolded and then a portion of the wall swung outward and we found ourselves standing at the top of the great staircase within a few yards of Consuelo’s apartments.

“This is uncanny, to say the least of it,” remarked Nikola. “Pray do any of these interesting passages open into the young lady’s room opposite, or into the smaller hall occupied by this gentleman and myself?”

“Not now, my lord,” the man replied. “Time was when they did, but the old lord didn’t take kindly to ‘em, and they was bricked up as much as five year ago.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Nikola; and you may imagine that I echoed the sentiment. Nikola thereupon thanked the old man and dismissed him, at the same time reiterating his order that the opening in the chasm below the drawbridge should be made secure.

The excitement of the search for Quong Ma and the damp of the passages had been too much for me, and by the time we reached the hall I could scarcely stand.

“Good heavens, Ingleby,” said Nikola, as I dropped into a chair, “you’re looking awfully ill. What is the matter?”

“I can’t exactly say,” I answered. “I fear I must have caught a chill on the battlements last night.”

“And yet you accompanied me down to those damp passages this morning. Was that wise?”

“I was not going to let you go alone,” I replied.

He glanced sharply at me, as if he would read my thoughts.

“Well, well, I’ll tell you what you must do: you must be off to bed at once. There can be no doubt about that.”

I tried to protest: I explained my desire to see the end of the experiment; but Nikola was adamant. To bed I must go, willy-nilly; and to bed I accordingly went, but not in my own room off the hall. An apartment farther down the corridor, next door to that occupied by Consuelo, was arranged for me; and when I was safely between the blankets, Nikola prescribed for me, and my sweetheart was duly installed as nurse. My indisposition must have been more severe than I had supposed, for before nightfall I was in a high state of fever, and by midnight was delirious.

I remember nothing further until I opened my eyes and found Consuelo sitting by my side.

“What does this mean?” I inquired, surprised to find her there.

“It means that you have been very ill,” she answered, “and that I am your nurse, and am not going to permit you to talk

very much.”

To do this was a feat of which I was incapable, but I was not going to be silent until I had learnt something of what had happened.

“How long have I been ill?” I inquired.

“More than a week,” she answered; and then added, “You naughty boy, you little know what a fright you have given me. But you must not talk any more, or Dr. Nikola will be angry.”

She poured out some medicine for me, bade me drink it, and then reseated herself beside me. In five minutes I was wrapped in a heavy slumber, from which I did not wake for several hours. When I did, I found Dr. Nikola installed as nurse; Consuelo had disappeared.

“Well, Ingleby,” said Nikola cheerily, as he felt my pulse, “you have had a sharp bout of it, but I am glad to see we have managed to pull you through. How do you feel in yourself?”

“Much better,” I answered, “though still a bit shaky.”

“I don’t wonder at it,” he said. “Do you feel hungry?”

“I feel as if I could eat anything,” I answered.

“Well, that’s a good sign. I’ll see that something is sent you. In the meanwhile keep as quiet as possible. When I leave you, I’ll send your sweetheart to you; she has been a devoted nurse, and between ourselves I rather fancy you owe your life to her.”

“God bless her!” I answered fervently. “But you call her my sweetheart. What do you mean by that?”

“My dear fellow, I know everything. One night the young lady in question was rather concerned about you, and in her agitation she allowed the cat to slip out of the bag. You young people seem to have managed the matter pretty well in the short time you have known each other. Now keep quiet for a few moments while I see if I can find her.”

He was making for the door, when I stopped him.

“You have not told me how the Don is,” I said. “How does the experiment progress?”

His face clouded over.

“It has proved successful,” he answered, but with a sudden sternness that surprised me. It was for all the world as if he were trying to convince me that what he said was correct, although in his own heart he knew it was not so. When he spoke again, it was very slowly.

“Yes, Ingleby,” he said, as if he were weighing every word before he uttered it, “the experiment has proved a success. I have made the Don a young man, but — well, to tell the truth, I have made a mistake in my calculations — a mistake that I cannot explain and that I can in no way account for.”

“And the result?”

“Don’t ask me,” he said, “for I am afraid I do not know myself. By the time you are on your feet again, I shall hope to have come nearer an understanding of the situation. Then I shall be able to tell you more of what I hope and fear. At present I scarcely like to think of it myself.”

To my surprise, as I watched him, I saw great beads of perspiration start out upon his forehead, and, for the first time since I had known him, I saw a look of terror in Dr. Nikola’s face. I tried to question him further upon the subject, but he bade me wait until I was stronger, and, presently repeating that he would find Consuelo, he left me. When my sweetheart entered the room, looking more beautiful than I had ever seen her, I forgot, for the time being, about Nikola.

“You are looking much better,” she said, as she came toward me and put down upon the table the tray she carried in her hand. “Here is some beef-tea which I have made for you myself. If you don’t drink it *all* up, I shall let the old woman in the kitchen make it for you in the future and bring it to you herself.”

“You had better not,” I answered. “In that case, I should refuse to touch a drop of it, and should die of slow starvation in consequence.”

With a gentleness that was infinitely becoming to her, she lifted my head and held the cup while I drank. If I took longer over it than I should have done at any other time, the fact must, of course, be attributed to my weakness.

“Dr. Nikola says he is very pleased with the progress you have made,” she said, when she had replaced the cup upon the table. “But you are to be kept very quiet for some days, and to sleep as much as possible.”

"And when am I to get up?" I asked.

"Get up!" she cried in mock horror. "You must not even think of such a thing for a week at least."

"A week!" I replied. "Do you think I've to stay here for a week?"

"So Dr. Nikola says."

The remainder of our conversation is too sacred to be set down in cold-drawn type. Let it suffice that, when I fell asleep again, it was with her hand in mine. I was more in love even than I had been before.

As Consuelo had predicted, more than a week had elapsed before I was permitted to leave my room. Even then I was not allowed to return to my duties at once, but spent the greater portion of my time with Consuelo on the battlements gaining strength with every breath of sea air that I inhaled.

Nikola I saw but little of. He examined me every morning, and on one or two occasions honoured us with his company for a brief period on the castle roof. At the best of times, however, he was not a good companion. He was invariably absorbed in his own thoughts, spoke but little, and struck me as being anxious to say goodbye almost as soon as he arrived. Since then I have learned the true reason of it all, and I have been able to see that complex character in a new light. It never struck me how lonely the man's life must be. During the whole time that I was associated with him I never once heard him speak of kith or kin. Friends he appeared to have none, while his acquaintances numbered only such men as were necessary to the particular work he happened to be engaged in at the moment of their meeting. His very attainments, his peculiar knowledge of the world, of its under and mystic side, were sufficient to make him hold aloof from his fellow-men. In all matters of comfort a rigid ascetic, the good things of life had no temptation for him. To sum it all up, of this I feel certain, so certain indeed that at times it becomes almost a pain, that Nikola, with all his sternness, his self-denial, his genius and his failings, hungered for one thing, and that was to be loved. Why should I say this, considering that the only evidence I have to offer tends to lead one's thoughts in a contrary direction? I do not know, but as I remarked just now, I feel convinced that my hypothesis is a correct one, as I am that I love Consuelo. But to return to my story. It was not until nearly a fortnight had elapsed, since my return to consciousness, that I was permitted to take up my duties again. When I did, I returned to my old quarters leading out of the hall, and I think Nikola was pleased to once more have my co-operation — at any rate, he led me to suppose that he was.

"When you think you are up to the mark, I shall be pleased to show you the Don," he said, "and to hear your opinion of him."

I expressed myself as being quite equal to seeing him at once.

"Very good," he answered, "but I warn you to be prepared for a great and somewhat unpleasant change in the man."

So saying, he led me across the hall towards the room in which I had, before my illness, spent so many hours. Inserting the key in the lock, he turned it and we entered. I had expected to find it exactly as I had last seen it. A surprise, however, was in store for me. The bedplace in the centre was gone, as were both the electrical appliances. The clock and thermometers had been removed, the only things that still remained being the electric lights which were suspended from the ceiling and the enclosed fixtures for regulating the supply of hot and cold air. In point of fact, it was as bare a room as well could be imagined.

"Don Miguel," said Nikola, "I have brought an old friend to see you."

I looked about the room, but for a moment could see nothing of the old man in question. Then my eye lighted on what looked like a heap of clothes huddled up on a mattress in the corner. On hearing Nikola's voice, a face looked up at me — a face so terrible, so demoniacal I might say, that I involuntarily shrank from it. What there was about it that caused me such revulsion, I cannot say. It was the countenance of a young man, if you can imagine a man endowed with perpetual youth, and with that youth the cunning, the cruelty, and the vice of countless centuries.

"Steady, my friend," I heard Nikola say, and as he did so he placed his hand upon my arm. "Remember, Ingleby, this is nothing more than an experiment."

Then addressing the crouching figure, he bade him stand up. With a snarl like that of a dog, or rather of a wild beast, who is compelled to do a thing very much against his will, the man obeyed. I was able then to take better stock of him. Accustomed as I was to the old Don's face, I found it difficult to realise that the healthy, vigorous man standing before me was he, and yet I had only to look at him carefully to have all doubt upon the subject removed. He was the same and yet not the same. At any rate, he was an illustration of the marvellous, nay, the almost unbelievable, success of Nikola's

experiment.

"You remember the Don as he was, and you can see to what I have been able to bring him," said Nikola sadly, and for one moment without a trace of triumph. This, however, was soon forthcoming.

"Out of an old man tottering on the brink of the grave, I have manufactured a young and vigorous creature such as you now see before you. I have made him, I have transformed him, I have subjected Nature to science, I have revolutionised the world, abolished death, and upset the teachings, and the essential idea, of all religions. I have proved that old age can be prevented, and the grave defied. And —and — *I have failed.*"

Under the intensity of his emotion his voice broke, and something very like a sob burst from him. Never since I had known Nikola had I seen him as he was then. To all appearances he was well-nigh broken-hearted.

"If you have done all this," I asked, "how can you say that you have failed?"

"Are you so blind that you cannot see?" he answered. "Examine the man for yourself, and you will find that he is a human being in animal life only. I have given him back his youth, his strength, his enjoyment in living, but I cannot give him back his mind. In his body I have triumphed; in his brain I have completely failed."

"But cannot this be set right?" I inquired. "Is the case quite hopeless?"

"Nothing is hopeless," he answered; "but it will take years, centuries perhaps, of work to find the secret. I thought, when I built up the body, I should be building up the brain as well. It was not so. In proportion as his body renewed its youth, his brain shrunk. Let me give you an illustration."

He went forward towards the man, who was now once more crouching upon the floor, watching us over his right shoulder, as if he were afraid we were going to do him harm.

"Well, Miguel," said Nikola, patting him upon the head, and speaking to him in the same tone he would have used to a favourite monkey, "how is it with you to-day?"

The man, however, took no notice, but bending down played with the lace of Nikola's shoe, now and again looking swiftly up into his face, as if he dreaded a blow, and as swiftly looking away again.

"This should prove to you what I mean," said Nikola, addressing me. "In his present condition he is less than a man, and yet where would you find a finer frame? His heart, his lungs, his constitution, all are perfect."

While he had been speaking, he had turned his back upon the beast upon the floor, and as he uttered the last words he moved towards me. He had not taken a step, however, before the Don was half on his feet. From childish idiocy his expression had changed until it was a fiendish malignity that surpasses all description in words.

In another moment he would have thrown himself on Nikola. As it was, he glared at him until he turned, when in an instant the wild expression had gone, and he was crouching upon the floor once more, picking at his fingers and smiling to himself.

"You can see for yourself what he is," said Nikola: "an imbecile; but for one ray of hope I should despair of him."

"There is, then, a ray of hope," I said eagerly, clutching like a drowning man at the straw he held out. "Thank God for that!"

"There is a ray," he answered, "but it is a very little one. I will give you an example."

Turning to the wretched creature on the floor, he extended his hand towards him, and, gradually lifting it, bade him rise. The effect was instantaneous. The man rose little by little until he stood upright. Once more pointing his hand directly at him, Nikola moved towards him, until the points of his fingers were scarcely an inch from the other's eyes. Then, slowly raising his fingers, he made an upward and a downward pass.

The eyes closed, and yet the man still remained rigid against the wall. Turning to me, Nikola said:

"You can see for yourself that he is absolutely under my influence and control."

I approached and made a careful examination. There could be no doubt about his condition: it was one of hypnotic coma; and, on raising one of the eyelids, I found the ball turned upwards and wandering in its orbit.

"You are satisfied?" inquired Nikola.

"Perfectly," I answered.

"In that case let us proceed."

"To whom am I speaking?" asked Nikola, addressing the man before him.

"To Miguel de Moreno," was the answer, given in a perfectly clear and strong voice, and without apparent hesitation. "Do you know where you are?"

"I am with Dr. Nikola."

"Before you came to me, with whom and where did you live?"

"I lived with my great-granddaughter in Cadiz."

"Have you any recollection of coming to England?"

"I remember it perfectly."

"Now lie down upon that mattress, and sleep without waking until eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

The man did as he was ordered without hesitation. Nikola covered him with the blankets, and as soon as we had made sure of his safety, we left the room, carefully locking the door after us.

"You can have no idea, Ingleby, what a disappointment this has been to me. Three times before I have tried and failed, but this time I made sure I had success within my grasp. I have progressed farther now than I have ever done before, it is true; but it is the brain that has beaten me. As long as I live I will persevere, and the perfect man, who shall retain his youth through all ages, shall eventually walk the earth. Now good-night."

He held out his hand to me, and as I shook it Apollyon came up, and rubbed himself against my leg, as if to show that he too appreciated my sympathy. I was about to retire to my room, when it struck me that I had heard nothing of our friend Quong Ma since we had searched the subterranean portion of the castle for him. I asked Nikola if he had anything to tell me concerning him.

"Nothing," he answered, "save that last night I felt certain that I saw a man cross the courtyard. It was just before midnight, the moon was about the building, and I am ready to stake anything that I am not deceived."

"But who could it have been?"

"That's exactly what I want to know," he answered. "You were safe in bed and asleep. It was not the caretaker, for I tried his door and found it locked, and from the sound that greeted me I had good proof it was not he."

"But might it not have been Ah-Win?" I asked.

"I thought so, and before going in search of the figure I hastened to his room, only to find him also asleep."

"In that case it must have been Quong Ma. But how does the fellow live? and why does he not strike?"

"Because he has not yet found his opportunity. When he does, you may be sure he will avail himself of it. Now once more good-night. You need not trouble about our patient; I shall take a look at him about midnight."

"Good-night," I said, and went to my room, the door of which I carefully locked. My last waking thoughts were of Consuelo, and my speculations as to what her feelings would be when she realised the terrible change that had taken place in her great-grandfather were sufficient to give me a nightmare. Over and over again I was afflicted with the most horrible dreams; and when I was roused by a loud thumping on my door, and Nikola's voice calling for admittance, it seemed so much part and parcel of the horror my brain had just pictured for me, that for the moment I took no notice of it. It sounded again; so, springing from my bed, I ran to the door, and opened it.

"What is the matter?" I asked, when he was standing before me. His usual pale face was now ghastly in its whiteness.

"Good heavens, man!" he cried, "you have no notion of what has happened. Dress yourself immediately and come with me!" He sat upon my bed while I huddled my clothes on; then, when I was ready, he seized me by the wrist, and half-dragged me, half-led me into the hall. Once there, he pointed to the figure of a man stretched out before his door. *It was Ah-Win; and his throat was cut from ear to ear!*

The sight was so sudden, and so totally unexpected, that it was almost too much for me. Recovering my presence of mind, however, I knelt down and examined him.

"Look at his hands!" said Nikola. "They are cut to the bone by some sharp-bladed instrument. The murderer must have come here in search of me. Ah-Win must have met him, tried to prevent him reaching the door, was unable to warn us, and so have met his fate."

We were both too much overcome to continue the discussion. *Quong Ma had struck at last!*

CHAPTER 55. WAR AND PEACE

AT the conclusion of the preceding chapter, I described to you the terrible discovery we had made of the death of Ah-Win. That he had met his fate in an endeavour to prevent Quong Ma from reaching his master's room seemed quite in accordance with the evidence before us. Small wonder was it, therefore, that Nikola was affected. But even in his grief he proved himself unlike the average man. Another man would have bewailed his loss, or at least have expressed some sorrow at his servant's unhappy lot. Nikola, however, did neither, and yet his grief was plain to the eye as if he had wept copious tears. Having satisfied himself that the poor fellow really was dead, he bade me help him carry the body down the passage to an empty room which adjoined his former quarters.

We laid it upon a bed there, and Nikola followed me into the passage, carefully locking the door behind him. When we were back in the hall once more, Nikola spoke.

"This has gone far enough," he said. "Come what may, we must find Quong Ma. The fellow must be in the castle at this minute."

"Shall we organise a search for him?" I said. "The man must be captured at any hazard; we are risking valuable lives by allowing him to remain at large."

Though I used the plural, I must confess I was thinking more of my darling than of anybody else. How did I know that, when Quong Ma found it impossible for him to get hold of Nikola, he would not revenge himself upon Consuelo?

"That we must find him goes without saying," Nikola replied. "I doubt very much, however, if it would be prudent for you to take part in the search. In the first place, you are still as weak as a baby; and in the second, the damp of the subterranean passages might very easily bring on a return of the fever."

"You surely do not imagine that I should permit you to go alone," I said.

Nikola gave a short laugh.

"I do not want to appear boastful," he said, "but I am very much afraid you do not know me yet, my dear Ingleby. However, I will confess that if you really do desire it, and feel equal to the exertion, I shall be very glad of your company."

"When do you propose to start?"

"At once," he answered. "I shall not know a minute's peace until I have revenged Ah-Win."

"And supposing we catch the fellow, what do you propose to do with him? It is a long way from here to the nearest police station."

"I don't fancy somehow I shall trouble the police," he said. "But we will talk of what we will do with him when we have got him. Now, if you are ready, come along."

Thereupon, for the second time we searched the castle for Quong Ma. As before, we first visited the battlements and the rooms on the next floor, the basement offices followed, and still being unsuccessful, we unbolted the door leading to the dungeons and entered the subterranean portion of the building. Cool as I endeavoured to appear, I am prepared to confess that, when the icy wind came up to greet us from those dark and dreary passages, I was far from feeling comfortable. I don't set up to be a braver man than my fellows, but it seemed to me to require more pluck to enter those dismal regions than to take part in a forlorn hope. With our revolvers in our hands, and Nikola holding the lantern above his head, we explored passage after passage and dungeon after dungeon. Rats scuttled away from beneath our feet, bats flew in the darkness above our heads; but, as before, not a sign of Quong Ma.

"I cannot understand it," said Nikola at last, and his voice echoed along the rocky passages. "We have explored every room in the castle and every dungeon underneath it, and not a trace of the man can we discover. We have bricked up the opening into the chasm, and lifted the drawbridge that connects us with the outside world, and yet we cannot catch him. He must be here somewhere."

"Exactly; but where?"

"If I knew, do you think I should be standing here?" Nikola replied sharply. "But let us try back again. I want to explore that secret passage the old man showed us the other day. I remember now that there was something that struck me as being rather peculiar about it."

We accordingly retraced our steps, found the passage in question, and ascended it. Reaching the point where, on the previous occasion, we had turned off to find the trap-door, opening at the head on the great staircase, we found, as Nikola had supposed, a second and smaller turning half hidden in shadow and which bore away to the right, that is to say in the direction of the keep. Fortunately, it was now level going, but so narrow was the passage that it was still impossible to walk two abreast.

"Hark! what was that?" Nikola suddenly cried, stopping and holding the lantern above his head.

We stopped and listened, and sure enough a shuffling noise came from the passage in front. A moment later the same sound we had heard when the old caretaker had opened the secret door reached us.

"If I am not mistaken, we have found his lair at last," my companion shouted and ran forward.

But certain as we felt that it was Quong Ma we had heard, we were too late to convince ourselves of the fact. The secret door stood open; the man, however, was not to be seen in the passage outside.

"Where are we?" I asked, for I was not familiar with the corridor in which we found ourselves.

"Between the keep and Ah-Win's quarters," Nikola replied. "Now I understand how that fiend has found his way into the hall. But let me think for a moment: there is the gate between us and the hall, and I have the key in my pocket. There is no other exit in either direction, so it seems to me that we have got our man at last. Is your revolver ready?"

"Quite ready," I replied.

"Come along, then. But remember this: if he attacks you, show him no mercy. He'll show you none. Remember Ah-Win."

With that we made our way along the corridor in the direction of the room where Nikola's — well, where the murdered man had been quartered.

Nikola unlocked the door and looked in, while I remained in the passage outside. I really believe I was more afraid of what I should see in there than of Quong Ma himself.

"He is not there," said Nikola when he rejoined me, and then went to the gate and tested it. "And he can't get out here. We've missed him somewhere, and must look back again."

We accordingly retraced our steps, examining room by room and preparing ourselves every time lest, when we turned the handle, Quong Ma should jump out upon us. But in every case we were disappointed.

"I was surprised just now," said Nikola, after we had left the last apartment and stood in the corridor once more, "but I am doubly so now. What on earth can have become of the fellow? He seems to vanish into thin air every time we get near him. There must be another secret passage hereabout of which we are ignorant. Before we return, however, I want to make quite certain of one thing; let us continue that passage by which we ascended from the dungeons just now."

We did so, Nikola once more going ahead with the lantern.

"Just as I thought," he cried. "Look here!"

He stopped, and stood with his back to the wall. At this point the passage came to an abrupt termination, and on the floor before us was an old blanket, a quantity of straw, about a loaf and a half of bread, and an earthenware pipkin containing a quart or so of water. Under the blanket was a half-used packet of candles, and from the grease that bespattered everything it was easily seen how he had obtained his illumination.

"We have found our bird's nest at last," said Nikola, "but I am afraid we have driven him away from it for good and all. But we will have him yet, or my name's not Nikola. Now let us go back to the hall; we can do no good by staying here."

We returned, but not before we had taken possession of the things we had found, and had carefully marked the position of the secret door, in case we should want to use it again.

"After breakfast we will have another try," said Nikola. "In the meantime we had better take a little rest. You look as if you stood in need of it."

It would have been better for me had I abandoned any thought of such a thing, for with Ah-Win lying dead only a few yards away and Quong Ma still at large, the drowsy god was difficult, if not impossible, to woo. Every danger that it would be possible for a man to imagine, I pictured for Consuelo; and when at last I did fall asleep, the dreams that harassed me were of the most horrible description. Right glad was I when morning broke and it became necessary to attend to the duties of the day.

"If I were you, I should say nothing to your sweetheart either of her great-grandfather's condition or of the tragedy of last night," said Nikola. I agreed with him, although I knew that it could not be very long before the former would become known to Consuelo.

"But surely she will hear about Ah-Win before very long?" I said. "Will it not be necessary for you to communicate with the county police, and for an inquest to be held?"

"Ingleby," replied Nikola, "ask me no questions I have no desire to draw you into the matter. It is sufficient for you to know that Ah-Win is dead,"— he paused for a minute, and then added, significantly —"*and buried!*"

Try how I would, I could not contain my surprise. How, when, and by whom had the poor Chinaman been buried? Had Nikola carried it out himself? It seemed impossible, and yet, knowing as I did the indomitable energy and working powers of the man, I felt it might very well be true. I would have questioned him further, but I could see that he was not in the humour to permit it. For this reason I held my peace, though I knew full well at the time that by so doing I was giving my consent to what was undoubtedly an illegal act.

From what I have said, I fancy it will be readily agreed that the past two or three days had been as full of incident as the greatest craver after excitement could desire. I had recovered from a serious illness, had witnessed the result of one of the most extraordinary experiments the world had seen, Ah-Win had been murdered, we had discovered Quong Ma's hiding-place in the castle, and had had a most exciting chase after him. Now Ah-Win had been buried secretly by Nikola, and if what had been done was discovered by the authorities, there is no saying in what sort of trouble we might not find ourselves. As soon as we had seen the Don, who was still wrapped in the same hypnotic slumber, and had breakfasted, we organised another search, only to meet with the same result. Later, I spent an hour with Consuelo upon the battlements. I was careful, however, to tell her nothing of the death of Ah-Win, nor of the reappearance of the detestable Chinaman in the castle. It would have served no good purpose, and would only have frightened her needlessly. When she reiterated her desire to see her great-grandfather, I found myself, if possible, at a still greater disadvantage. On returning to Nikola in the hall, I placed the matter before him. To my surprise, he did not receive it in the same spirit as I had expected he would do. I had anticipated a direct refusal, but he gave me nothing of the kind.

"Why should she not see him?" he said. "Provided she give me proper notice, I fancy I can arrange that he shall behave in every way as she would wish him to do."

"When, then, may the interview take place?"

"Let us say at midday. Will that suit you? But before we arrange anything definitely, let us examine him ourselves, and see how he is likely to conduct himself."

We accordingly made our way to the patient's room. I had noticed by the hall clock that it wanted only three minutes of the hour at which Nikola had ordered the Don to wake. On approaching his bedplace, we found him still sleeping peacefully, in exactly the same position as when we had seen him last. With his eyes closed and one strong arm thrown out upon the floor, he looked a magnificent specimen of a man. If only Dr. Nikola could perfect the brain, here was a being seemingly capable of anything. But would he be able to do so? That was the question. Watch in hand, Nikola knelt down beside the bed, and for some time not a sound broke the stillness of the room. Punctually, however, as the long hand of the clock pointed to the hour, the Don gave a long sigh. I jumped to the conclusion that he was about to wake in obedience to Nikola's command; but, to our surprise, he did not do so.

"Strange," I heard Nikola mutter to himself, and, stooping over the patient, he lifted the eyelids and carefully examined the pupils.

Five minutes went by, and still he did not wake.

"Don Miguel," said Nikola at last, "I command you to wake. You cannot disobey me,"

A slight movement was visible, but still the sleeper did not comply with the order given him. It was not until a quarter of an hour had elapsed that consciousness returned to him. With the opening of his eyes the animal look which I had noticed on the previous day came back to him. Instead of rising to his feet as he was ordered, he crouched and cowered in the corner, pulling at his bedclothes, and watching us the while, as if he would do us a mischief on the slightest provocation. Dangerous as the man had appeared the day before, it struck me that he was even more so to-day.

"It is very plain that we shall have to keep an eye on you, my friend," said Nikola. "I am not quite certain that you are going to be docile much longer. Let me feel your pulse."

He stooped, and was about to take hold of the other's wrist, when the man sprang forward, and, seizing the Doctor with both hands, laid hold of his arm with his teeth, just below the elbow. Fortunately, Nikola was wearing a thick velvet coat, otherwise the injury might have been a severe one. Seeing what had happened, I threw myself upon the man, and, tearing him off, forced him down upon his bed. He struggled in my grasp, snapping at me and foaming at the mouth like a mad dog; but I had him too secure, and did not let go my hold until Nikola had fixed his arms behind him.

"Good heavens, Nikola!" I cried, scarcely able to contain my emotion, "this is too terrible! What on earth are we to do with him?"

"I do not quite see what we can do," Nikola replied, wiping the perspiration from his forehead as he spoke. "However, I must try my hand on him once more. If you can manage to keep him still, and I can get him under my influence, we ought to be able to keep him quiet while we have time to think."

I did as requested, while Nikola made slow mesmeric passes before the man's eyes. It was fully ten minutes, however, before he succeeded; but as soon as he did, the patient's heartrending struggles ceased, and he lay down upon his bed, sleeping quietly.

"I began to be afraid I was losing my influence over him," said Nikola, as he rose to his feet.

"One thing is quite certain," I answered, "and that is, Consuelo must not see him while he is in this state. It would frighten her to death."

"And she would never forgive me," said Nikola; and I thought I detected a note of sadness in his voice. "Are you going to leave him as he is?" I inquired.

"For the present," Nikola answered. "I must make up something that will have a soothing effect upon him. You need have no fear; he will be quite safe where he is."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a movement on the bed caused us both to look round. Little as we had anticipated such a thing, Nikola's influence was slowly but surely working off, and the man was returning to his old state again. Even now, I never like to think of what happened during the next ten minutes.

Before we could reach him, the Don was on his feet and had rushed upon me, Nikola ran to my assistance, and, strong

men as we both were, I assure you that at first we could not cope with him. The struggle was a terrific one. He fought like the madman he certainly was, and with an animal ferocity that rendered him doubly difficult to deal with. When, at last, we did manage to force him back on to his bed and make him secure, we were both completely exhausted; we could only lean against the wall and pant: conversation was out of the question.

"This will never do," said Nikola, when he had sufficiently recovered to speak; "if this sort of thing goes on, he will murder some one."

"But how are you going to prevent it?" I asked. "It is plain that your influence has lost its effect."

"There is nothing for it but to administer an opiate," he answered. "Do you think you can manage to hold him while I procure one?"

I fancied I could; at any rate, I expressed myself as very willing to try. Nikola immediately hurried away. He informed me afterwards that he was not gone more than a minute, but had I been asked I should have put the time down as at least a quarter of an hour. To describe to you my feelings during that wait would be impossible; the loathing, the horror, and the abject personal fear of the man writhing below me seemed to fill my whole being.

"I don't think we shall have very much more trouble with him for an hour or two to come," said Nikola, when the drug had taken effect, and we were on our feet once more.

"But we cannot go on administering drugs for ever," I answered; "what do you propose to do later on?"

"That is what we've got to find out," he replied. "In the meantime we must keep him up like this, and take it in turns to watch him. You had better go out now and get a breath of fresh air. If you see your sweetheart, pacify her with the best excuse you can think of."

"Are you quite sure you are safe with him alone?" I asked.

"I must risk it," he replied. But as I moved towards the door, he stopped me.

"Ingleby," he said, speaking slowly and sadly, "I don't know whether you will believe me or not when I say how deeply I regret what has happened in this case. I would have given anything, my own life even, that things should not have fallen out in this way. And what is more, I do not say this for my own sake."

"You are thinking of Consuelo," I said.

"I am," he answered. "It is for her sake I feel the regret. As a rule, I am not given to sentiment, but somehow this seems altogether different. But there, go away and tell her what you think best."

I left him and went in search of Consuelo. She was in her usual place in the tower above her room. And when she saw me she ran to greet me with outstretched hands. Something — it might have been my pale face — frightened her.

"My darling," I said, "you are not ill, are you? What makes you look so alarmed?"

"I have been frightened," she answered; "more frightened than I can tell you."

For a moment I thought she must have heard about her great-grandfather, but such was not the case.

"I have only been up here a few moments," she answered. "The caretaker's wife was in my room when I left. The door was open, and, as I climbed the turret stairs, I thought I heard her call me. Turning round, I was about to descend again, when I saw, standing at the foot of the stairs, a man. He was looking up at me. For a moment I could scarcely believe my eyes. Who do you think it was?"

Though I could easily guess, I managed to force myself to utter the word "Who?"

"He was the man you saw behind the rock, the same I saw bending over me in my cabin on board the *Dona Mercedes*, that terrible Chinaman with half an ear."

I feared that she might see from my face that I knew more than I cared to tell; but, as good fortune had it, she failed to notice it.

"Surely you must have been mistaken," I answered. "What could the man be doing in the castle?"

"I do not know," she answered. "But I am as certain I saw him as I am of anything. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, watching me. Then he began to move in my direction; but before he could reach the bottom step, I heard a door open along the corridor. This must have frightened him, for he fled round the corner, and I saw no more of him."

"It must have been my opening the door that saved you," I said. "Thank God I came when I did!"

"But what does it mean?" she asked. "Why did that man come on board the boat, and why has he followed us here?"

"I think the reason is to be found in the fact that he is Dr. Nikola's enemy," I replied. "They had a private quarrel in China some years ago, and ever since then this man has been following him about the world, endeavouring to do him harm. The case is a serious one, darling, and as you love me you must run no risks. Be on your guard night and day. See that your door is locked at night, and never venture from your room after dusk, unless I am with you. It makes my blood run cold when I think of your running such risks as you did this morning."

"But what about you?" she said, looking up at me with her beautiful, frightened eyes. "Oh, why cannot we take my grandfather and go away, and never see this dreadful place again?"

"We must wait patiently," I answered; "the Don is not fit to travel just yet."

She gave a little sigh, and next moment it was time for me to leave her.

For the next two or three days following, Nikola and I took it in turns to act as sentry over the Don. If it was not difficult work, it was the reverse of pleasant; for as soon as the effect of each successive opiate wore off, his evil nature invariably reasserted itself. Sometimes he would sit for an hour or more watching me, as if he intended springing upon me the instant I was off my guard. At others he would crouch in a corner, tearing into atoms everything within his reach. More than once he was really violent, and it became necessary for me to signal to Nikola for assistance. The horror of those days I shall never forget. When I say that, not once but several times, I have left that room dripping with perspiration, the pure sweat of terror, my feelings may be partially imagined. It was not madness we had to contend with; it was worse than that. It was the fighting of a lost soul against the effect of man's prying into what should have been the realms of the unknowable.

"This sort of thing cannot last much longer," said Nikola, when our patient was lying drugged and helpless upon his mattress on the third night after the death of Ah-Win. And I knew he was right. Outraged nature would avenge herself.

When Nikola had bade me good-night, I examined the Don to make sure that he was not shamming sleep in order to try and get the better of me directly I was alone. Finding him to be quite helpless, I seated myself in my chair and prepared to spend my watch in as comfortable a fashion as possible under the circumstances. During the day I had passed a considerable portion of my time with my sweetheart in the open air, and, in consequence, I found myself growing exceedingly sleepy. Knowing it would never do to allow slumber to get the better of me in that room, I rose from my chair and began to pace the floor. This had the effect of temporarily rousing me, and, when I resealed myself, I thought I had dispelled the attack. It soon returned, however, and this time it would not be denied. I rubbed my eyes, I pinched myself, I got up and walked about. It was no good, however, I returned to my chair, my eyelids closed, and, almost without knowing it, I dozed off. When I woke again, it was with a start. I rubbed my eyes and looked about me. Heavens! what mischief had I done? *The Don was not in his corner, the key was gone from the hook upon which it usually hung, and, worse than all, the door stood open!*

For a moment I was so overwhelmed with horror that I could do nothing. But only for a moment. Then I knew that I must act, and at once. I rang the bell for Nikola, and, having done so, dashed into the hall. Almost simultaneously Nikola made his appearance, coming from his room.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "Why do you ring for me?"

"The Don has escaped!" I almost shouted. "Like the fool I am, I fell asleep, and during that time he must have recovered his wits, stolen the key, and escaped from the room. Oh, what have I done? If she should see him as he is, it will kill her!"

For a moment it looked as if Nikola would have swept me off the face of the earth, but the look scarcely came into his eyes before it was gone again.

"We must find him," he cried, "before he can do any mischief, and, what is more, we must not separate, for he would be more than a match for us single-handed."

Accordingly we left the hall and proceeded towards the Dona Consuelo's apartments. I thanked Heaven when I found that the door was locked. Calling to her, in answer to her cry of "Who is there?" I told her that I only desired to assure myself of her safety, and after that we passed on up the turret stairs and along the battlements, but no sign of the Don could we discover there. Returning to the corridor again, we descended to the great entrance hall and searched the courtyard and basement.

The moon shone clear, and the courtyard was as light as day. Had there been any one there, we must certainly have seen him. Suddenly there rang out the most unearthly scream it has ever been my ill-luck to hear. It came from the direction of the chapel, which lay between the keep and what had once been the banquet hall. From where we stood the interior of the latter was quite visible to us. On either side it had tall windows, so that the light shone directly through. The scream had scarcely died away before we distinctly saw a short figure dash into the room, and out again upon the other side. An instant later and a taller figure followed, and also disappeared. Again and again the scream rang out, while Nikola stood rooted to the spot, unable to move hand or foot.

"I see it all!" cried Nikola. "That was Quong Ma and the other was the Don. They'll kill each other if they meet."

I thought of Consuelo, and of the terror she would feel should she hear that dreadful noise.

“They must not meet!” I cried. “It is too terrible. At any cost we must prevent it Where do you think they are now?”

As if to let us know, another scream rang out. This time it came from our own quarters.

“Come on!” cried Nikola, and dashed into the building. As you may suppose, I followed close upon his heels. In this order we flew up the stairs and along the first gallery, intending, if possible, to reach the small hall by the staircase near the kitchen in which Ah-Win had worked, and thus cut them off. As we crossed the threshold however, a wild hubbub came from the passage ahead, and told us that we were too late. I knew what it meant, and, if I had not been by that time quite bankrupt of emotions, I should certainly have been doubly terrified now.

Leaving the kitchen, we dashed along the passage, only to find that the room usually occupied by Nikola’s unfortunates was empty. With the exception of one solitary specimen, who by reason of his infirmity was unable to fly, they had all vanished. Leaving him to his own desires, we passed the iron gate, now thrown open, and a moment later had entered the hall itself. Once more the cry sounded, this time coming from a spot somewhat nearer Consuelo’s apartment. On hearing it, my heart seemed to stand still. What if she should imagine that I was in danger and should open her door? The same thought must have been in Nikola’s mind, for I heard him say to himself —“Anything but that.”

Side by side we raced for her door, only to find it was still shut and locked.

Almost at the same instant a scream, louder than any we had yet heard, sounded from the battlements above.

“At last!” I cried, and led the way up the stone stairs. I can only say that of all the horrid scenes I have ever witnessed, that I saw before me then was the very worst. In the centre of the open space between the parapets, fighting like wild beasts, were the two men of whom we were in search. Their arms were twined about each other, and, as they swayed to and fro, the sound of their heavy breathing could be distinctly heard. Having reached the top of the stairs, we paused irresolute. What was to be done? To have attempted to separate them would only have been to draw their anger upon ourselves, and to have made the fight a general one. The moon shone down upon us, revealing the smooth sea on one side and the many turrets of the castle on the other. From fighting in the centre of the open space, they gradually came nearer the parapet of the wall. Quong Ma must then have realised how near he stood to death, for he redoubled his energy.

“They will be over!” shouted Nikola, and started to run towards them. He had scarcely spoken before they reached the

edge. For a moment, locked in each other's arms, they paused upon the brink; then, with a wild shriek from Quong Ma, they lost their balance and disappeared. I clapped my hands to my eyes to shut out the fearful sight. When I took them away again, all was over, and both Nikola and I knew that Quong Ma and Don Miguel de Moreno were dead.

I suppose I must have fainted, for when I returned to my senses once more, I found myself seated on the top of the stairs, and Consuelo's arms about me.

There remains but little more to tell.

At the time of that dreadful scene upon the battlements it was full tide; and though Nikola and I searched every nook and cranny along the coast-line for many miles, the bodies of the two men could not be found. In all probability they had drifted out to sea. The same day I summoned up my courage, and prepared to tell my sweetheart everything; but when I sought her out, and was about to commence my confession, she stopped me.

"Say nothing to me about it, dear," she began. "I cannot bear it yet. Dr. Nikola has told me everything. He exonerates you completely."

"But what of ourselves?" I asked. "Consuelo, you and I are alone together in the world; will you give me the right to care for your future happiness? My darling, will you be my wife?"

"When and where you please," she answered, holding out her hands to me and looking up at me with her beautiful, trusting eyes. I told her of my straitened means, and how hard the struggle would be at first.

"No matter," she answered bravely, "we will fight the world together. I am used to poverty, and with you beside me I shall know no fear."

A hour later I had an interview with Nikola in the hall.

"Ingleby," he said, "this is the end of our intercourse. I have tried my experiment, and though I have succeeded in many particulars, I have failed in the main essential. How much I regret what has happened, I must leave you to imagine; but it is too late — what is done cannot be undone. I have given orders that the yacht shall be prepared. She will convey you to Newcastle, whence you can proceed in any direction you may desire. One thing is certain: Dona Consuelo must leave this place, and, as you are to be her husband, it is only fit and proper that you should go with her. I have only one wish to offer you: it is that you may be as happy as these past weeks have been sad."

He held out his hand to me, and I took it.

"We shall meet no more," he said. "Go away and forget that you ever met Dr. Nikola. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," I answered. Without another word he turned and left the room.

Shortly before midday we boarded the yacht. Steam was up when we arrived, and within a few minutes we were steaming out of the little bay. Consuelo and I stood together at the taffrail, and looked up at the grim old castle on the cliff above our heads. Standing on the battlements we could distinctly see a solitary figure, who waved his hands to us. Then the little vessel passed round the headland, and that was the last we saw of Dr. Nikola.



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BOOK V

FAREWELL

CHAPTER 56

We were in Venice; Venice the silent and mysterious; the one European city of which I never tire. My wife had not enjoyed good health for some months past, and for this reason we had been wintering in Southern Italy. After that we had come slowly north, spending a month in Florence, and a fortnight in Rome *en route*, until we found ourselves in Venice, occupying a suite of apartments at Galaghetti's famous hotel overlooking the Grand Canal. Our party was a small one; it consisted of my wife, her friend, Gertrude Trevor, and myself, Richard Hatteras, once of the South Sea Islands, but now of the New Forest, Hampshire, England. It may account for our fondness of Venice when I say that four years previous we had spent the greater part of our honeymoon there. Whatever the cause may have been, however, there could be no sort of doubt that the grand old city, with its palaces and churches, its associations stretching back to long-forgotten centuries, and its silent waterways, possessed a great fascination for us. We were never tired of exploring it, finding something to interest us in even the most out-of-the-way corners. In Miss Trevor we possessed a charming companion, a vital necessity, as you will admit, when people travel together. She was an uncommon girl in more ways than one; a girl, so it seems to me, England alone is able to produce. She could not be described as a pretty girl, but then the word "pretty" is one that sometimes comes perilously near carrying contempt with it; one does not speak of Venus de Medici as pretty, nor would one describe the Apollo Belvedere as very nice-looking. That Miss Trevor was exceedingly handsome would, I fancy, be generally admitted. At any rate she would command attention wherever she might go, and that is an advantage which few of us possess. Should a more detailed description of her be necessary, I might add that she was tall and dark, with black hair and large luminous eyes that haunted one, and were suggestive of a southern ancestor. She was the daughter, and indeed the only child, of the well-known Dean of Bedminster, and this was the first time she had visited Italy, or that she had been abroad. The wonders of the Art Country were all new to her, and in consequence our wanderings were one long succession of delight. Every day added some new pleasure to her experiences, while each night saw a life desire gratified.

In my humble opinion, to understand Italy properly one should not presume to visit her until after the first blush of youth has departed, and then only when one has prepared oneself to properly appreciate her many beauties. Venice, above all others, is a city that must be taken seriously. To come at a proper spirit of the place one must be in a reverent mood. Cheap jokes and Cockney laughter are as unsuited to the place, where Falieri yielded his life, as a downcast face would be in Nice at carnival time. On the afternoon of the particular day from which I date my story, we had been to the island of Murano to pay a visit to the famous glass factories of which it is the home. By the time we reached Venice once more it was nearly sunset. Having something like an hour to spare we made our way, at my wife's suggestion, to the Florian *café* on the piazza of Saint Mark in order to watch the people. As usual the place was crowded, and at first glance it looked as if we should be unable to find sufficient vacant chairs. Fortune favoured us, however, and when we had seated ourselves and I had ordered coffee, we gave ourselves up to the enjoyment of what is perhaps one of the most amusing scenes in Venice. To a thoughtful mind the Great Square must at all times be an object of absorbing interest. I have seen it at every hour, and under almost every aspect: at break of day, when one has it to oneself and is able to enjoy its beauty undisturbed; at midday, when the importunate shop-keepers endeavour to seduce one into entering their doors (by tales of the marvels therein); at sunset, when the *cafés* are crowded, the band plays, and all is merriment; and last, but not least, at midnight, when the moon is sailing above Saint Mark's, the square is full of strange shadows, and the only sound to be heard is the cry of a gull on the lagoon, or the "Sa Premi" of some belated gondolier.

"This is the moment to which I have looked forward all my life," said Miss Trevor, as she sat back in her chair and watched the animated crowd before her. "Look at that pretty little boy with the pigeons flocking round him. What a picture he would make if one only had a camera."

"If you care to have a photo of him one can easily be obtained," I remarked. "Any one of these enterprising photographers would be only too pleased to take one for you for a few centissimi. I regret to say that many of our countrymen have a weakness for being taken in that way."

"Fancy Septimus Brown, of Tooting," my wife remarked, "a typical English paterfamilias, with a green veil, blue spectacles, and white umbrella, daring to ask the sun to record his image with the pigeons of St. Mark's clustering about his venerable head. Can't you picture the pride of that worthy gentleman's family when they produce the album on Sunday

afternoons and show it to their friends? ‘This is pa,’ the eldest girl will probably remark, ‘when he was travelling in Venice’ (as if Venice were a country in which one must be perpetually moving on), ‘and that’s how the pigeons came down to him to be fed. Isn’t it splendid of him?’ Papa, who has never ventured beyond Brighton beach before, will be a person of importance from that moment.”

“You forget one circumstance, however,” Miss Trevor replied, who enjoyed an argument, and for this reason contradicted my wife on principle, “that in allowing himself to be taken at all, Brown of Tooting has advanced a step. For the moment he dared to throw off his insularity, as the picture at which you are laughing is indisputable testimony. Do you think he would dare to be photographed in a similar fashion in his own market-place, standing outside his shop-door with his assistants watching him from behind the counter? I am quite sure he would not!”

“A very excellent argument,” I answered. “Unfortunately, however, it carries with it its own refutation. The mere fact that Brown takes the photograph home to show to his friends goes a long way towards proving that he is still as insular as when he set out. If he did not consider himself of sufficient importance to shut out a portion of Saint Mark’s with his voluminous personality, he would not have employed the photographer at all, in which case we are no further advanced than before.”

These little sparring-matches were a source of great amusement to us. The Cockney tourist was Miss Trevor’s *bête noir*. And upon this failing my wife and I loved to twit her. On the whole I rather fancy she liked being teased by us.

We had finished our coffee and were still idly watching the people about us when I noticed that my wife had turned a little pale. I was about to remark upon it, when she uttered an exclamation as if something had startled her.

“Good gracious! Dick,” she cried, “surely it is not possible. It must be a mistake.”

“What is it cannot be possible?” I inquired. “What do you think you see?”

I glanced in the direction she indicated, but could recognize no one with whom I was acquainted. An English clergyman and his daughter were sitting near the entrance to the *café*, and some officers in uniform were on the other side of them again, but still my wife was looking in the same direction and with an equally startled face. I placed my hand upon her arm. It was a long time since I had seen her so agitated.

“Come, darling,” I said, “tell me what it is that troubles you.”

“Look,” she answered, “can you see the table a little to the right of that at which those officers are seated?”

I was about to reply in the affirmative, but the shock I received deprived me of speech. The person to whom my wife referred had risen from his chair, and was in the act of walking towards us. I looked at him, looked away, and then looked again. No! there was no room for doubt; the likeness was unmistakable. I should have known him anywhere. *He was Doctor Nikola*; the man who had played such an important part in our life’s drama. Five years had elapsed since I had last seen him, but in that time he was scarcely changed at all. It was the same tall, thin figure; the same sallow, clean-shaven face; the same piercing black eyes. As he drew nearer I noticed that his hair was a little more grey, that he looked slightly older; otherwise he was unchanged. But why was he coming to us? Surely he did not mean to speak to us? After the manner in which he had treated us in by-gone days I scarcely knew how to receive him. He on his side, however, was quite self-possessed. Raising his hat with that easy grace that always distinguished him, he advanced and held out his hand to my wife.

“My dear Lady Hatteras,” he began in his most conciliatory tone, “I felt sure you would recognize me. Observing that you had not forgotten me, I took the liberty of coming to pay my respects to you.”

Then before my wife could reply he had turned to me and was holding out his hand. For a moment I had half determined not to take it, but when his glittering eyes looked into mine I changed my mind and shook hands with him more cordially than I should ever have thought it possible for me to do. Having thus broken the ice, and as we had to all intents and purposes permitted him to derive the impression that we were prepared to forgive the Past, nothing remained for us but to introduce him to Miss Trevor. From the moment that he had approached us she had been watching him covertly, and that he had produced a decided impression upon her was easily seen. For the first time since we had known her she, usually so staid and unimpressible, was nervous and ill at ease. The introduction effected she drew back a little, and pretended to be absorbed in watching a party of our fellow-countrymen who had taken their places at a table a short distance from us. For my part I do not mind confessing that I was by no means comfortable. I remembered my bitter hatred of Nikola in days gone by. I recalled that terrible house in Port Said, and thought of the night on the island when I

had rescued my wife from his clutches. In my estimation then he had been a villain of the deepest dye, and yet here he was sitting beside me as calm and collected, and apparently as interested in the *résumé* of our travels in Italy that my wife was giving him, as if we had been bosom friends throughout our lives. In any one else it would have been a piece of marvellous effrontery; in Nikola's case, however, it did not strike one in the same light. As I have so often remarked, he seemed incapable of acting like any other human being. His extraordinary personality lent a glamour to his simplest actions, and demanded for them an attention they would scarcely have received had he been less endowed.

"Have you been long in Venice?" my wife inquired when she had completed the record of our doings, feeling that she must say something.

"I seldom remain anywhere for very long," he answered, with one of his curious smiles. "I come and go like a Will-o'-the-wisp; I am here to-day and gone to-morrow."

It may have been an unfortunate remark, but I could not help uttering it.

"For instance, you are in London to-day," I said, "in Port Said next week, and in the South Sea Islands a couple of months later."

He was not in the least disconcerted.

"Ah! I see you have not forgotten our South Sea adventure," he replied cheerfully. "How long ago it seems, does it not? To me it is like a chapter out of another life." Then, turning to Miss Trevor, who of course had heard the story of our dealings with him sufficiently often to be weary of it, he added, "I hope you are not altogether disposed to think ill of me. Perhaps some day you will be able to persuade Lady Hatteras to forgive me, that is to say if she has not already done so. Yet I do not know why I should plead for pardon, seeing that I am far from being in a repentant mood. As a matter of fact I am very much afraid that, should the necessity arise, I should be compelled to act as I did then."

"Then let us pray most fervently that the necessity may never arise," I answered. "I for one do not entertain a very pleasant recollection of that time."

I spoke so seriously that my wife looked sharply up at me. Fearing, I suppose, that I might commit myself, she added quickly —

"I trust it may not. For I can assure you, Doctor Nikola, that my inclinations lie much nearer Bond Street than the South Sea Islands."

All this time Miss Trevor said nothing, but I could tell from the expression upon her face that Nikola interested her more than she would have been willing to admit.

"Is it permissible to ask where you are staying?" he inquired, breaking the silence and speaking as if it were a point upon which he was most anxious to be assured.

"At Galagheti's," I answered. "While in Venice we always make it our home."

"Ah! the good Galagheti," said Nikola softly. "It is a long time since I last had the pleasure of seeing him. I fancy, however, he would remember me. I was able to do him a slight service some time ago, and I have always understood that he possesses a retentive memory."

Then, doubtless feeling that he had stayed long enough, he rose and prepared to take leave of us.

"Perhaps, Lady Hatteras, you will permit me to do myself the honour of calling upon you?" he said.

"We shall be very pleased to see you," my wife replied, though with no real cordiality.

He then bowed to Miss Trevor, and shook hands with myself.

"Good-bye, Hatteras," he continued. "I shall hope soon to see you again. I expect we have lots of news for each other, and doubtless you will be interested to learn the history and subsequent adventures of that peculiar little stick which caused you so much anxiety, and myself so much trouble, five years ago. My address is the Palace Revecce, in the Rio del Consiglio, where, needless to say, I shall be delighted to see you if you care to pay me a visit."

I thanked him for his invitation, and promised that I would call upon him.

Then with a bow he took his departure, leaving behind him a sensation of something missing, something that could not be replaced. To sit down and continue the conversation where he had broken into it was out of the question. We accordingly rose, and after I had discharged the bill, strolled across the piazza towards the lagoon. Observing that Miss Trevor was still very silent, I inquired the cause.

"If you really want me to tell you, I can only account for it by saying that your friend, Doctor Nikola, has occasioned it," she answered. "I don't know why it should be so, but that man has made a curious impression upon me."

"He seems to affect every one in a different manner," I said, and for some reason made no further comment upon her speech.

When we had called a gondola, and were on our way back to our hotel, she referred to the subject again.

"I think I ought to tell you that it is not the first time I have seen Doctor Nikola," she said. "You may remember that yesterday, while Phyllis was lying down, I went out to do some shopping. I cannot describe exactly which direction I took, save that I went towards the Rialto. It is sufficient that in the end I reached a chemist's shop. It was only a small place, and very dark, so dark indeed that I did not see that it contained another customer until I was really inside. Then I noticed a tall man busily engaged in conversation with the shopman. He was declaiming against some drugs he had purchased there on the previous day, and demanding that for the future they should be of better quality, otherwise he would be compelled to take his patronage elsewhere. In the middle of this harangue he turned round, and I was permitted an opportunity of seeing his face. He was none other than your friend, Doctor Nikola."

"But, my dear Gertrude," said Phyllis, "with all due respect to your narrative, I do not see that the mere fact of your having met Doctor Nikola in a chemist's shop yesterday, and your having been introduced to him to-day, should have caused you so much concern."

"I do not know why it should," she answered, "but it is a fact, nevertheless. Ever since I saw him yesterday, his face, with its terrible eyes, has haunted me. I dreamt of it last night. All day long I have had it before me, and now, as if to add to the strangeness of the coincidence, he proves to be the man of whom you have so often told me — your demoniacal, fascinating Nikola. You must admit that it is very strange."

"A coincidence, a mere coincidence, that is all," I replied. "Nikola possesses an extraordinary face, and it must have impressed itself more deeply upon you than the average countenance is happy enough to do."

Whether my explanation satisfied her or not, she said no more upon the subject. But that our strange meeting with Nikola had had an extraordinary effect upon her was plainly observable. As a rule she was as bright and merry a companion as one could wish to have; on this particular evening, however, she was not herself at all. It was the more annoying for the reason that I was anxious that she should shine on this occasion, as I was expecting an old friend, who was going to spend a few days with us in Venice. That friend was none other than the Duke of Glenbarth, who previous to his succession to the Dukedom had been known as the Marquis of Beckenham, and who, as the readers of the history of my adventures with Doctor Nikola may remember, figured as a very important factor in that strange affair. Ever since the day when I had the good fortune to render him a signal service in the bay of a certain south-coast watering-place, and from the time that he had accepted my invitation to join us in Venice, I had looked forward to his coming with the greatest possible eagerness. As it happened it was well-nigh seven o'clock by the time we reached our hotel. Without pausing in the hall further than to examine the letter-rack, we ascended to our rooms on the floor above. My wife and Miss Trevor had gone to their apartments, and I was about to follow their example as soon as I had obtained something from the sitting-room.

"A nice sort of host, a very nice host," said a laughing voice as I entered. "He invites me to stay with him, and is not at home to bid me welcome. My dear old Dick, how are you?"

"My dear fellow," I cried, hastening forward to greet him, "I must beg your pardon ten thousand times. I had not the least idea that you would be here so early. We have been sitting on the piazza, and did not hurry home."

"You needn't apologize," he answered. "For once an Italian train was before its time. And now tell me about yourself. How is your wife, how are you, and what sort of holiday are you having?"

I answered his questions to the best of my ability, keeping back my most important item as a surprise for him.

"And now," I said, "it is time to dress for dinner. But before you do so, I have some important news for you. Who do you think is in Venice?"

Needless to say he mentioned every one but the right person.

"You had better give it up, you will never guess," I said. "Who is the most unlikely person you would expect to see in Venice at the present moment?"

"Old Macpherson, my solicitor," he replied promptly. "The rascal would no more think of crossing the Channel than he would contemplate standing on his head in the middle of the Strand. It must be Macpherson."

"Nonsense," I cried. "I don't know Macpherson in the first place, and I doubt if he would interest me in the second. No! no! this man is neither a Scotchman nor a lawyer. He is an individual bearing the name of Nikola."

I had quite expected to surprise him, but I scarcely looked for such an outbreak of astonishment.

"What?" he cried, in amazement. "You must be joking. You don't mean to say that you have seen Nikola again?"

"I not only mean that I have seen him," I replied, "but I will go further than that, and say that he was sitting on the piazza with us not more than half-an-hour ago. What do you think his appearance in Venice means?"

"I don't know what to think," he replied, with an expression of almost comic bewilderment upon his face. "It seems impossible, and yet you don't look as if you were joking."

"I tell you the news in all sober earnestness," I answered, dropping my bantering tone. "It is a fact that Nikola is in Venice, and, what is more, that he has given me his address. He has invited me to call upon him, and if you like we will go together. What do you say?"

"I shall have to take time to think about it," Glenbarth replied seriously. "I don't suppose for a moment he has any intention of abducting me again; nevertheless, I am not going to give him the opportunity. By Jove, how that fellow's face comes back to me. It haunts me!"

"Miss Trevor has been complaining of the same thing," I said.

"Miss Trevor?" the Duke repeated. "And pray who may Miss Trevor be?"

"A friend of my wife's," I answered. "She has been travelling with us for the last few months. I think you will like her. And now come along with me and I'll show you your room. I suppose your man has discovered it by this time?"

"Stevens would find it if this hotel were constructed on the same principle as the maze at Hampton Court," he answered. "He has the virtue of persistence, and when he wants to find a thing he secures the person who would be the most likely to tell him, and sticks to him until his desire has been gratified."

It turned out as he had predicted, and three-quarters of an hour later our quartet sat down to dinner. My wife and Glenbarth, by virtue of an old friendship, agreed remarkably well, while Miss Trevor, now somewhat recovered from her Nikola indisposition, was more like her old self. It was a beautiful night, and after dinner it was proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously, that we should charter a gondola and go for a row upon the canal. On our homeward voyage the gondolier, by some strange chance, turned into the Rio del Consiglio.

"Perhaps you can tell me which is the Palace Revecce?" I said to the man.

He pointed to a building we were in the act of approaching.

"There it is, signor," he said. "At one time it was a very great palace but now —" here he shrugged his shoulders to enable us to understand that its glory had departed from it. Not another word was said upon the subject, but I noticed that all our faces turned in the direction of the building. With the exception of one solitary window it was in total darkness. As I looked at the latter I wondered whether Nikola were in the room, and if so, what he was doing? Was he poring over some of his curious books, trying some new experiment in chemistry, or putting to the test some theory such as I had found him at work upon in that curious house in Port Said? A few minutes later we had left the Rio del Consiglio behind us, had turned to the right, and were making our way back by another watery thoroughfare towards the Grand Canal.

"Thanks to your proposition we have had a delightful evening," Miss Trevor said, as we paused to say good-night at the foot of the staircase a quarter of an hour or so later. "I have enjoyed myself immensely."

"You should not tell him that, dear," said my wife. "You know how conceited he is already. He will take all the credit, and be unbearable for days afterwards." Then turning to me, she added, "You are going to smoke, I suppose?"

"I had thought of doing so," I replied; and then added with mock humility, "If you do not wish it of course I will not do so. I was only going to keep Glenbarth company."

They laughed and bade us good-night, and when we had seen them depart in the direction of their rooms we lit our cigars and passed into the balcony outside.

At this hour of the night the Grand Canal looked very still and beautiful, and we both felt in the humour for confidences.

"Do you know, Hatteras," said Glenbarth, after the few moments' pause that followed our arrival in the open air, "that Nikola's turning up in Venice at this particular juncture savours to me a little of the uncanny. What his mission may be, of

course I cannot tell, but that it is some diabolical thing or another I haven't a doubt."

"One thing is quite certain," I answered, "he would hardly be here without an object, and, after our dealings with him in the past, I am prepared to admit that I don't trust him any more than you do."

"And now that he has asked you to call upon him what are you going to do?"

I paused before I replied. The question involved greater responsibilities than were at first glance apparent. Knowing Nikola so well, I had not the least desire or intention to be drawn into any of the plots or machinations he was so fond of working against other people. I must confess, nevertheless, that I could not help feeling a large amount of curiosity as to the subsequent history of that little stick, to obtain which he had spent so much money, and had risked so many lives.

"Yes, I think I shall call upon him," I said reflectively, as if I had not quite made up my mind. "Surely to see him once more could do no harm? Good heavens! what an extraordinary fellow he is! Fancy you or I being afraid of any other man as we are afraid of him, for mind you, I know that you stand quite as much in awe of him as I do. Why, do you know when my eyes fell upon him this afternoon I felt a return of the old dread his presence used to cause in me five years ago! The effect he had upon Miss Trevor was also very singular, when you come to think of it."

"By the way, Hatteras, talking of Miss Trevor, what an awfully nice girl she is. I don't know when I have ever met a nicer. Who is she?"

"She is the daughter of the Dean of Bedminster," I answered; "a splendid old fellow."

"I like his daughter," the Duke remarked. "Yes, I must say that I like her very much."

I was glad to hear this, for I had my own little dreams, and my wife, who, by the way, is a born matchmaker, had long ago come to a similar conclusion.

"She is a very nice girl," I replied, "and what is more, she is as good as she is nice." Then I continued, "He will be indeed a lucky man who wins Gertrude Trevor for his wife. And now, since our cigars are finished, what do you say to bed? It is growing late, and I expect you are tired after your journey."

"I am quite ready," he answered. "I shall sleep like a top. I only hope and pray that I shall not dream of Nikola."



CHAPTER 57

Whether it was our excursion upon the canal that was responsible for it I cannot say; the fact, however, remains, that next morning every member of our party was late for breakfast. My wife and I were the first to put in an appearance, Glenbarth followed shortly after, and Miss Trevor was last of all. It struck me that the girl looked a little pale as she approached the window to bid me good-morning, and as she prided herself upon her punctuality, I jestingly reproved her for her late rising.

"I am afraid your gondola excursion proved too much for you," I said, in a bantering tone, "or perhaps you dreamt of Doctor Nikola."

I expected her to declare in her usual vehement fashion that she would not waste her time dreaming of any man, but to my combined astonishment and horror her eyes filled with tears, until she was compelled to turn her head away in order to hide them from me. It was all so unexpected that I did not know what to think. As may be supposed, I had not the slightest intention of giving her pain, nor could I quite see how I managed to do so. It was plain, however, that my thoughtless speech had been the means of upsetting her, and I was heartily sorry for my indiscretion. Fortunately my wife had not overheard what had passed between us.

"Is he teasing you again, Gertrude?" she said, as she slipped her arm through her friend's. "Take my advice and have nothing to do with him. Treat him with contempt. Besides, the coffee is getting cold, and that is a very much more important matter. Let us sit down to breakfast."

Nothing could have been more opportune. We took our places at the table, and by the time the servant had handed the first dishes Miss Trevor had recovered herself sufficiently to be able to look me in the face, and to join in the conversation without the likelihood of a catastrophe. Still there could be no doubt that she was far from being in a happy frame of mind. I said as much to my wife afterwards, when we were alone together.

"She told me she had had a very bad night," the little woman replied. "Our meeting with Doctor Nikola yesterday on the piazza upset her for some reason or another. She said that she had dreamt of nothing else. As you know she is very highly strung, and when you think of the descriptions we have given her of him, it is scarcely to be wondered at that she should attach an exaggerated importance to our unexpected meeting with him. That is the real explanation of the mystery. One thing, however, is quite certain; in her present state of mind she must see no more of him than can be helped. It might upset her altogether. Oh, why did he come here to spoil our holiday?"

"I cannot see that he has spoilt it, my dear," I returned, putting my arm round her waist and leading her to the window. "The girl will very soon recover from her fit of depression, and afterwards will be as merry as a marriage-bell. By the way, I don't know why I should think of it just now, but talking of marriage-bells reminds me that Glenbarth told me last night that he thought Gertrude one of the nicest girls he had ever met."

"I am delighted to hear it," my wife answered. "And still more delighted to think that he has such good sense. Do you know, I have set my heart upon that coming to something. No! you needn't shake your head. For very many reasons it would be a most desirable match."

"For my own part I believe it was for no other reason that you bothered me into inviting him to join our party here. You are a matchmaker. I challenge you to refute the accusation."

"I shall not attempt to do so," she retorted with considerable hauteur. "It is always a waste of time to argue with you. At any rate you must agree with me that Gertrude would make an ideal duchess."

"So you have travelled as far as that, have you?" I inquired. "I must say that you jump to conclusions very quickly. Because Glenbarth happens to have said in confidence to me (a confidence I am willing to admit I have shamefully abused) that he considers Gertrude Trevor a very charming girl, it does not follow that he has the very slightest intention of asking her to be his wife. Why should he?"

"If he doesn't he is not fit to sit in the House of Lords," she answered, as if that ought to clinch the argument. "Fancy a man posing as one of our hereditary legislators who doesn't know how to seize such a golden opportunity. As a good churchwoman I pray for the nobility every Sunday morning; and if not knowing where to look for the best wife in the world may be taken as a weakness, and it undoubtedly is, then all I can say is, that they require all the praying for they can get!"

"But I should like to know, how is he going to marry the best wife in the world?" I asked.

"By asking her," she retorted. "He doesn't surely suppose she is going to ask him?"

"If he values his life he'd better not do that!" I said savagely. "He will have to answer for it to me if he does!"

"Ah," she answered, her lips curling, "I thought as much. You are jealous of him. You don't want him to ask her because you fancy that if he does your reign will be over. A nice admission for a married man, I must say!"

"I presume you mean because I refuse to allow him to flirt with my wife?"

"I mean nothing of the kind, and you know it. How dare you say, Dick, that I flirt with the Duke?"

"Because you have confessed it," I answered with a grin of triumph, for I had got her cornered at last. "Did you not say, only a moment ago, that if he did not know where to find the best wife in the world he was unfit to sit in the House of Lords? Did you not say that he ought to be ashamed of himself if he did not ask her to be his wife? Answer that, my lady."

"I admit that I did say it; but you know very well that I referred to Gertrude Trevor!"

"Gertrude Trevor is not yet a wife. The best wife in the world is beside me now; and since you are already proved to be in the wrong you must perforce pay the penalty."

She was in the act of doing so when Gertrude entered the room.

"Oh, dear," she began, hesitating in pretended consternation, "is there never to be an end of it?"

"An end of what?" demanded my wife with some little asperity, for she does not like her little endearments to be witnessed by other people.

"Of this billing and cooing," the other replied. "You two insane creatures have been married more than four years, and yet a third person can never enter the room without finding you love-making. I declare it upsets all one's theories of marriage. One of my most cherished ideas was that this sort of thing ceased with the honeymoon, and that the couple invariably lead a cat-and-dog life for the remainder of their existence."

"So they do," my wife answered unblushingly. "And what can you expect when one is a great silly creature who will not learn to jump away and be looking innocently out of the window when he hears the handle turned? Never marry, Gertrude. Mark my words: you will repent it if you do!"

"Well, for ingratitude and cool impudence, that surpasses everything!" I said in astonishment. "Why, you audacious creature, not more than five minutes ago you were inviting me to co-operate in the noble task of finding a husband for Miss Trevor!"

"Richard, how can you stand there and say such things?" she ejaculated. "Gertrude, my dear, I insist that you come away at once. I don't know what he will say next."

Miss Trevor laughed.

"I like to hear you two squabbling," she said. "Please go on, it amuses me!"

"Yes, I will certainly go on," I returned. "Perhaps you heard her declare that she fears what I may say next. Of course she does. Allow me to tell you, Lady Hatteras, that you are a coward. If the truth were known, it would be found that you are trembling in your shoes at this moment. For two centimes, paid down, I would turn Queen's evidence, and reveal the whole plot."

"You had better not, sir," she replied, shaking a warning finger at me. "In that case the letters from home shall be withheld from you, and you will not know how your son and heir is progressing."

"I capitulate," I answered. "Threatened by such awful punishment I dare say no more. Miss Gertrude, will you not intercede for me?"

"I think that you scarcely deserve it," she retorted. "Even now you are keeping something back from me."

"Never mind, my dear, we'll let him off this time with a caution," said my wife, "provided he promises not to offend again. And now let us settle what we are going to do to-day."

When this important matter had been arranged, it was reported to us that the ladies were to spend the morning shopping, leaving the Duke and myself free to follow our own inclinations. Accordingly, when we had seen them safely on their way to the Merceria, we held a smoking council to arrange how we should pass the hours until lunch-time. As we discovered afterwards, we both had a certain thought in our minds, which for some reason we scarcely liked to broach to each other. It was settled, however, just as we desired, but in a fashion we least expected.

We were seated in the balcony outside our room, watching the animated traffic on the Grand Canal below, when a servant came in search of us and handed me a note. One glance at the characteristic writing was sufficient to show me that it was from Doctor Nikola. I opened it with an eagerness that I did not attempt to conceal, and read as follows —

“Dear Hatteras,

“If you have nothing more important on hand this morning, can you spare the time to come and see me? As I understand the Duke of Glenbarth is with you, will you not bring him also? It will be very pleasant to have a chat upon by-gone days, and, what is more, I fancy this old house will interest you.

“Yours very truly,

“Nikola.”

“What do you say?” I inquired, when I had finished reading, “shall we go?”

“Let us do so by all means,” the Duke replied. “It will be very interesting to meet Nikola once more. There is one thing, however, that puzzles me; how did he become aware of my arrival in Venice? You say he was with you on the piazza last night, so that he could not have been at the railway station, and as I haven’t been outside since I came, except for the row after dinner, I confess it puzzles me.”

“You should know by this time that it is useless to wonder how Nikola acquires his knowledge,” I replied. “For my own part I should like to discover *his* reason for being in Venice. I am very curious on that point.”

Glenbarth shook his head solemnly.

“If Nikola does not want us to know,” he argued, “we shall leave his house as wise as we entered it. If he *does* let us know, I shall begin to grow suspicious, for in that case it is a thousand pounds to this half-smoked cigar that we shall be called upon to render him assistance. However, if you are prepared to run the risk I will do so also.”

“In that case,” I said, rising from my chair and tossing what remained of my cigar into the water below, “let us get ready and be off. We may change our minds.”

Ten minutes later we had chartered a gondola and were on our way to the Palace Revecce.

As a general rule when one sets out to pay a morning call one is not the victim of any particular nervousness; on this occasion however both Glenbarth and I, as we confessed to each other afterwards, were distinctly conscious of being in a condition which would be described by persons of mature years as an unpleasant state of expectancy, but which by school-boys is denominated “funk.” The Duke, I noticed, fidgeted with his cigar, allowed it to go out, and then sat with it in his mouth unlighted. There was a far-away look on his handsome face that told me that he was recalling some of the events connected with the time when he had been in Nikola’s company. This proved to be the case, for as we turned from the Grand Canal into the street in which the palace is situated, he said —

“By the way, Hatteras, I wonder what became of Baxter, Prendergrast, and those other fellows?”

“Nikola may be able to tell us,” I answered. Then I added after a short pause, “By Jove, what strange times those were.”

“Not half so strange to my thinking as our finding Nikola in Venice,” Glenbarth replied. “That is the coincidence that astonishes me. But see, here we are.”

As he spoke the gondola drew up at the steps of the Palace Revecce, and we prepared to step ashore. As we did so I noticed that the armorial bearings of the family still decorated the posts on either side of the door, but by the light of day the palace did not look nearly so imposing as it had done by moonlight the night before. One thing about it was certainly peculiar. When we ordered the gondolier to wait for us he shook his head. Not for anything would he remain there longer than was necessary to set us down. I accordingly paid him off, and when we had ascended the steps we entered the building. On pushing open the door we found ourselves standing in a handsome courtyard, in the centre of which was a well, its coping elegantly carved with a design of fruit and flowers. A broad stone staircase at the further end led up to the floor above, but this, as was the case with everything else, showed unmistakable signs of having been allowed to fall to decay. As no concierge was to be seen, and there was no one in sight of whom we might make inquiries, we scarcely knew how to proceed. Indeed, we were just wondering whether we should take our chance and explore the lower regions in search of Nikola, when he appeared at the head of the staircase and greeted us.

“Good-morning,” he said, “pray come up. I must apologize for not having been down-stairs to receive you.”

By the time he had finished speaking he had reached us, and was shaking hands with Glenbarth with the heartiness of an old friend.

"Let me offer you a hearty welcome to Venice," he said to Glenbarth after he had shaken hands with myself. Then looking at him once more, he added, "If you will permit me to say so, you have changed a great deal since we last saw each other."

"And you, scarcely at all," Glenbarth replied.

"It is strange that I should not have done so," Nikola answered, I thought a little sadly, "for I think I may say without any fear of boasting that, since we parted at Pipa Lannu, I have passed through sufficient to change a dozen men. But we will not talk of that here. Let us come up to my room, which is the only place in this great house that is in the least degree comfortable."

So saying he led the way up the stairs, and then along a corridor, which had once been beautifully frescoed, but which was now sadly given over to damp and decay. At last, reaching a room in the front of the building, he threw open the door and invited us to enter. And here I might digress for a moment to remark, that of all the men I have ever met, Nikola possessed the faculty of being able to make himself comfortable wherever he might be, in the greatest degree. He would have been at home anywhere. As a matter of fact this particular apartment was furnished in a style that caused me considerable surprise. The room itself was large and lofty, while the walls were beautifully frescoed, the work of one Andrea Bunopelli, of whom I shall have more to say anon. The furniture was simple, but extremely good; a massive oak writing-table stood beside one wall, another covered with books and papers was opposite it, several easy-chairs were placed here and there, another table in the centre of the room supported various chemical paraphernalia, while books of all sorts and descriptions, in all languages and bindings, were to be discovered in every direction.

"After what you have seen of the rest of the house, this strikes you as being more homelike, does it not?" Nikola inquired, as he noticed the look of astonishment upon our faces. "It is a queer old place, and the more I see of it the stranger it becomes. Some time ago, and quite by chance, I became acquainted with its history; I do not mean the political history of the respective families that have occupied it; you can find that in any guide-book. I mean the real, inner history of the house itself, embracing not a few of the deeds which have taken place inside its walls. I wonder if you would be interested if I were to tell you that in this very room, in the year fifteen hundred and eleven, one of the most repellent and cold-blooded murders of the Middle Ages took place. Perhaps now that you have the scene before you you would like to hear the story. You would? In that case pray sit down. Let me offer you this chair, Duke," he continued, and as he spoke he wheeled forward a handsomely carved chair from beside his writing-table. "Here, Hatteras, is one for you. I myself will take up my position here, so that I may be better able to retain your attention for my narrative."

So saying he stood between us on the strip of polished floor which showed between two heavy oriental rugs.

"For some reasons," he began, "I regret that the story I have to tell should run upon such familiar lines. I fancy, however, that the *dénouement* will prove sufficiently original to merit your attention. The year fifteen hundred and nine, the same which found the French victorious at Agnadello, and the Venetian Republic at the commencement of that decline from which it has never recovered, saw this house in its glory. The owner, the illustrious Francesco del Revecce, was a sailor, and had the honour of commanding one of the many fleets of the Republic. He was an ambitious man, a good fighter, and as such twice defeated the fleet of the League of Camberi. It was after the last of these victories that he married the beautiful daughter of the Duke of Levano, one of the most bitter enemies of the Council of Ten. The husband being rich, famous, and still young enough to be admired for his personal attractions; the bride one of the wealthiest, as well as one of the most beautiful women in the Republic, it appeared as if all must be well with them for the remainder of their lives. A series of dazzling *fêtes*, to which all the noblest and most distinguished of the city were invited, celebrated their nuptials and their possession of this house. Yet with it all the woman was perhaps the most unhappy individual in the universe. Unknown to her husband and her father she had long since given her love elsewhere; she was passionately attached to young Andrea Bunopelli, the man by whom the frescoes of this room were painted. Finding that Fate demanded her renunciation of Bunopelli, and her marriage to Revecce, she resolved to see no more of the man to whom she had given her heart. Love, however, proved stronger than her sense of duty, and while her husband, by order of the Senate, had put to sea once more in order to drive back the French, who were threatening the Adriatic, Bunopelli put into operation the scheme that was ultimately to prove their mutual undoing. Unfortunately for Revecce he was not successful in his venture, and by and by news reached Venice that his fleet had been destroyed, and that he himself had been taken

prisoner. 'Now,' said the astute Bunopelli, 'is the time to act.' He accordingly took pens, paper, and his ink-horn, and in this very room concocted a letter which purported to bear the signature of the commander of the French forces, into whose hands the Venetian admiral had fallen and then was. Its meaning was plain enough. It proved that for a large sum of money Revecce had agreed to surrender the Venetian fleet, and, in order to secure his own safety, in case the Republic should lay hands on him afterwards, it was to be supposed that he himself had only been taken prisoner after a desperate resistance, as had really been the case. The letter was written, and that night the painter himself dropped it into the lion's mouth. Revecce might return now as soon as he pleased. His fate was prepared for him. Meanwhile the guilty pair spent the time as happily as was possible under the circumstances, knowing full well that should the man against whom they had plotted return to Venice, it would only be to find himself arrested, and with the certainty, on the evidence of the incriminating letter, of being immediately condemned to death. Weeks and months went by. At last Revecce, worn almost to a skeleton by reason of his long imprisonment, *did* manage to escape. In the guise of a common fisherman he returned to Venice; reached his own house, where a faithful servant recognized him and admitted him to the palace. From the latter's lips he learnt all that had transpired during his absence, and was informed of the villainous plot that had been prepared against him. His wrath knew no bounds; but with it all he was prudent. He was aware that if his presence in the city were discovered, nothing could save him from arrest. He accordingly hid himself in his own house and watched the course of events. What he saw was sufficient to confirm his worst suspicion. His wife was unfaithful to him, and her paramour was the man to whom he had been so kind a friend, and so generous a benefactor. Then when the time was ripe, assisted only by his servant, the same who had admitted him to his house, he descended upon the unhappy couple. Under threats of instant death he extorted from them a written confession of their treachery. After having made them secure, he departed for the council-chamber and demanded to be heard. He was the victim of a conspiracy, he declared, and to prove that what he said was true he produced the confession he had that day obtained. He had many powerful friends, and by their influence an immediate pardon was granted him, while permission was also given him to deal with his enemies as he might consider most desirable. He accordingly returned to this house with a scheme he was prepared to put into instant execution. It is not a pretty story, but it certainly lends an interest to this room. The painter he imprisoned here."

So saying Nikola stooped and drew back one of the rugs to which I have already referred. The square outline of a trap-door showed itself in the floor. He pressed a spring in the wall behind him, and the lid shot back, swung round, and disappeared, showing the black abyss below. A smell of damp vaults came up to us. Then, when he had closed the trap-door again, Nikola drew the carpet back to its old position.

“The wretched man died slowly of starvation in that hole, and the woman, living in this room above, was compelled to listen to his agony without being permitted the means of saving him. Can you imagine the scene? The dying wretch below, doing his best to die like a man in order not to distress the woman he loved, and the outraged husband calmly pursuing his studies, regardless of both.”

He looked from one to the other of us and his eyes burnt like living coals.

“It was brutish, it was hellish,” cried Glenbarth, upon whom either the story, or Nikola’s manner of narrating it, had produced an extraordinary effect. “Why did the woman allow it to continue? Was she mad that she did not summon assistance? Surely the Authorities of a State which prided itself upon its enlightenment, even in those dark ages, would not have tolerated such a thing?”

“You must bear in mind the fact that the Republic had given the husband permission to avenge his wrongs,” said Nikola very quietly. “Besides, the woman could not cry out for the reason that her tongue had been torn out at the roots. When both were dead their bodies were tied together and thrown into the canal, and the same day Revecce set sail again, to ultimately perish in a storm off the coast of Sicily. Now you know one of the many stories connected with this old room. There are others in which that trap-door has played an equally important part. I fear, however, none of them can boast so

dramatic a setting as that I have just narrated to you.”

“How, knowing all this, you can live in the house passes my comprehension,” gasped Glenbarth. “I don’t think I am a coward, but I tell you candidly that I would not spend a night here, after what you have told me, for anything the world could give me.”

“But surely you don’t suppose that what happened in this room upwards of three hundred years ago could have any effect upon a living being to-day?” said Nikola, with what I could not help thinking was a double meaning. “Let me tell you, that far from being unpleasant it has decided advantages. As a matter of fact it gives me the opportunity of being free to do what I like. That is my greatest safeguard. I can go away for five years, if I please, and leave the most valuable of my things lying about, and come back to the discovery that nothing is missing. I am not pestered by tourists who ask to see the frescoes, for the simple reason that the guides take very good care not to tell them the legend of the house, lest they may be called upon to take them over it. Many of the gondoliers will not stop here after nightfall, and the few who are brave enough to do so, invariably cross themselves before reaching, and after leaving it.”

“I do not wonder at it,” I said. “Taken altogether it is the most dismal dwelling I have ever set foot in. Do you mean to tell me that you live alone in it?”

“Not entirely,” he replied. “I have companions: an old man who comes in once a day to attend to my simple wants, and my ever-faithful friend —”

“Apollyon,” I cried, forestalling what he was about to say.

“Exactly, Apollyon. I am glad to see that you remember him.”

He uttered a low whistle, and a moment later the great beast that I remembered so well stalked solemnly into the room, and began to rub himself against the leg of his master’s chair.

“Poor old fellow,” continued Nikola, picking him up and gently stroking him, “he is growing very feeble. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at, for he is already far past the average age of the feline race. He has been in many strange places, and has seen many queer things since last we met, but never anything much stranger than he has witnessed in this room.”

“What do you mean?” I inquired. “What has the cat seen in this room that is so strange?”

“Objects that we are not yet permitted to see,” Nikola answered gravely. “When all is quiet at night, and I am working at that table, he lies curled up in yonder chair. For a time he will sleep contentedly, then I see him lift his head and watch something, or somebody, I cannot say which, moving about in the room. At first I came to the conclusion that it must be a bat, or some night bird, but that theory exploded. Bats do not remain at the same exact distance from the floor, nor do they stand stationary behind a man’s chair for any length of time. The hour will come, however, when it will be possible for us to see these things; I am on the track even now.”

Had I not known Nikola, and if I had not remembered some very curious experiments he had performed for my special benefit two years before, I should have inclined to the belief that he was boasting. I knew him too well, however, to deem it possible that he would waste his time in such an idle fashion.

“Do you mean to say,” I asked, “that you really think that in time it will be possible for us to see things which at present we have no notion of? That we shall be able to look into the world we have always been taught to consider Unknowable?”

“I do mean it,” he replied. “And though you may scarcely believe it, it was for the sake of the information necessary to that end that I pestered Mr. Wetherall in Sydney, imprisoned you in Port Said, and carried the lady, who is now your wife, away to the island in the South Seas.”

“This is most interesting,” I said, while Glenbarth drew his chair a little closer.

“Pray tell us some of your adventures since we last saw you,” he put in. “You may imagine how eager we are to hear.”

Thereupon Nikola furnished us with a detailed description of all that he had been through since that momentous day when he had obtained possession of the stick that had been bequeathed to Mr. Wetherall by China Pete. He told us how, armed with this talisman, he had set out for China, where he engaged a man named Bruce, who must have been as plucky as Nikola himself, and together they started off in search of an almost unknown monastery in Thibet. He described with a wealth of exciting detail the perilous adventures they had passed through, and how near they had been to losing their lives in attempting to obtain possession of a certain curious book in which were set forth the most wonderful secrets relating to the laws of Life and Death. He told us of their hair-breadth escapes on the journey back to civilization, and showed how

they were followed to England by a mysterious Chinaman, whose undoubted mission was to avenge the robbery, and to obtain possession of the book. At this moment he paused, and I found an opportunity of asking him whether he had the book in his possession now.

"Would you care to see it?" he inquired. "If so, I will show it to you."

On our answering in the affirmative he crossed to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took from it a small curiously bound book, the pages of which were yellow with age, and the writing so faded that it was almost impossible to decipher it.

"And now that you have plotted and planned, and suffered so much to obtain possession of this book, what use has it been to you?" I inquired, with almost a feeling of awe, for it seemed impossible that a man could have endured so much for so trifling a return.

"In dabbling with such matters," Nikola returned, "one of the first lessons one learns is not to expect immediate results. There is the collected wisdom of untold ages in that little volume, and when I have mastered the secret it contains, I shall, like the eaters of the forbidden fruit, possess a knowledge of all things, Good and Evil."

Replacing the book in the drawer he continued his narrative, told us of his great attempt to probe the secret of Existence, and explained to us his endeavour to put new life into a body already worn out by age.

"I was unsuccessful in what I set out to accomplish," he said, "but I advanced so far that I was able to restore the man his youth again. What I failed to do was to give him the power of thought or will. It was the brain that was too much for me, that vital part of man without which he is nothing. When I have mastered that secret I shall try again, and then, perhaps, I shall succeed. But there is much to be accomplished first. Only I know how much!"

I looked at him in amazement. Was he jesting, or did he really suppose that it was possible for him, or any other son of man, to restore youth, and by so doing to prolong life perpetually? Yet he spoke with all his usual earnestness, and seemed as convinced of the truth of what he said as if he were narrating some well-known fact. I did not know what to think.

At last, seeing the bewilderment on our faces, I suppose, he smiled, and rising from his chair reminded us that if we had been bored we had only ourselves to thank for it. He accordingly changed the conversation by inquiring whether we had made any arrangements for that evening. I replied that so far as I knew we had not, whereupon he came forward with a proposition.

"In that case," said he, "if you will allow me to act as your guide to Venice, I think I could show you a side of the city you have never seen before. I know her as thoroughly as any man living, and I think I may safely promise that your party will spend an interesting couple of hours. What have you to say to my proposal?"

"I am quite sure we shall be delighted," I replied, though not without certain misgivings. "But I think I had better not decide until I have seen my wife. If she has made no other arrangements, at what hour shall we start?"

"At what time do you dine?" he inquired.

"At seven o'clock," I replied. "Perhaps we might be able to persuade you to give us the pleasure of your company?"

"I thank you," he answered. "I fear I must decline, however. I am hermit-like in my habits so far as meals are concerned. If you will allow me I will call for you, shall we say at half-past eight? The moon will have risen by that time, and we should spend a most enjoyable evening."

"At half-past eight," I said, "unless you hear to the contrary," and then rose from my chair. Glenbarth followed my example, and we accordingly bade Nikola good-bye. Despite our protest, he insisted on accompanying us down the great staircase to the courtyard below, his terrible cat following close upon his heels. Hailing a gondola, we bade the man take us back to our hotel. For some minutes after we had said good-bye to Nikola we sat in silence as the boat skimmed over the placid water.

"Well, what is your opinion of Nikola now?" I said, as we turned from the Rio del Consiglio into the Grand Canal once more. "Has he grown any more commonplace, think you, since you last saw him?"

"On the contrary, he is stranger than ever," Glenbarth replied. "I have never met any other man who resembled him in the slightest degree. What a ghastly story that was! His dramatic telling of it made it appear so real that towards the end of it I was almost convinced that I could hear the groans of the poor wretch in the pit below, and see the woman wringing her hands and moaning in the room in which we were sitting. Why he should have told it to us is what I cannot understand,

neither can I make out what his reasons can be for living in that house.”

“Nikola’s actions are like himself, entirely inexplicable,” he answered. “But that he has some motive beyond the desire he expressed for peace and quiet, I have not the shadow of a doubt.”

“And now with regard to to-night,” said the Duke, I am afraid a little pettishly. “I was surprised when you accepted his offer. Do you think Lady Hatteras and Miss Trevor will care about such an excursion?”

“That is a question I cannot answer at present,” I replied. “We must leave it to them to decide. For my own part, I can scarcely imagine anything more interesting.”

When we reached Galaghetti’s I informed my wife and Miss Trevor of Nikola’s offer, half expecting that the latter, from the manner in which she had behaved at the mere mention of his name that morning, would decline to accompany us, and, therefore, that the excursion would fall through. To my surprise, however, she did nothing of the kind. She fell in with the idea at once, and, so far as we could see, without reluctance of any kind.

There was nothing for it, therefore, under these circumstances, but for me to fall back upon the old commonplace, and declare that women are difficult creatures to understand.



CHAPTER 58

In the previous chapter I recorded the surprise I felt at Miss Trevor's acceptance of Doctor Nikola's invitation to a gondola excursion. Almost as suddenly as she had shown her fear of him, she had recovered her tranquillity, and the result, as I have stated, was complete perplexity on my part. With a united desire to reserve our energies for the evening, we did not arrange a long excursion for that afternoon, but contented ourselves with a visit to the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo. Miss Trevor was quite recovered by this time, and in very good spirits. She and Glenbarth were on the most friendly terms, consequently my wife was a most happy woman.

"Isn't it nice to see them together?" she whispered, as we crossed the hall and went down the steps to our gondola. "They are suited to each other almost as — well, if I really wanted to pay you a compliment, which you don't deserve, I should say as we are. Do you notice how prettily she gives him her hand so that he may help her into the boat?"

"I do," I answered grimly. "And it only shows the wickedness of the girl. She is as capable of getting into the boat without assistance as he is."

"And yet you help her yourself every time you get the chance," my wife retorted. "I have observed you take the greatest care that she should not fall, even when the step has been one of only a few inches, and I have been left to get down by myself. Perhaps you cannot recall that day at Capri?"

"I have the happiest recollections of it," I replied. "I helped her quite half-a-dozen times."

"And yet you grudge that poor boy the opportunities that you yourself were once so eager to enjoy. You cannot deny it."

"I am not going to attempt to deny it," I returned. "I *do* grudge him his chances. And why shouldn't I? Has she not the second prettiest hands, and the second neatest ankle, in all Europe?"

My wife looked up at me with a suspicion of a smile hovering round her mouth. When she does that her dimples are charming.

"And the neatest?" she inquired, as if she had not guessed. Women can do that sort of thing with excellent effect.

"Lady Hatteras, may I help you into the gondola?" I said politely, and for some reason, best known to herself, the reply appeared to satisfy her.

Of one thing there could be no sort of doubt. Miss Trevor had taken a decided liking to Glenbarth, and the young fellow's delight in her company was more than equal to it. By my wife's orders I left them together as much as possible during the afternoon, that is to say as far as was consistent with the duties of an observant chaperon. For instance, while we were in the right aisle of the church, examining the mausoleum of the Doge, Pietro Mocenningo, and the statues of Lombardi, they were in the choir proper, before the famous tomb of Andrea Vendramin, considered by many to be the finest of its kind in Venice. As we entered the choir, they departed into the left transept. I fancy, however, Glenbarth must have been a little chagrined when she, playing her hand according to the recognized rules, suggested that they should turn back in search of us. Back they came accordingly, to be received by my wife with a speech that still further revealed to me the duplicity of women.

"You are two naughty children," she said, with fairly simulated wrath. "Where on earth have you been? We have been looking for you everywhere!"

"You are so slow," put in Miss Trevor, and then she added, without a quaver in her voice or blush upon her cheek, "We dawdled about in order to let you catch us up."

I thought it was time for me to interfere.

"Perhaps I should remind you young people that at the present moment you are in a church," I said. "Would it not be as well, do you think, for you to preserve those pretty little prevarications until you are in the gondola? You will be able to quarrel in greater comfort there. It will also give Phyllis time to collect her thoughts, and to prepare a new indictment."

My wife treated me to a look that would have annihilated another man. After that I washed my hands of them and turned to the copy of Titian's *Martyrdom of Saint Peter*, which Victor Emmanuel had presented to the church in place of the original, which had been destroyed. Later on we made our way, by a long series of tortuous thoroughfares, to the piazza

of Saint Mark, where we intended to sit in front of Florian's *café* and watch the people until it was time for us to return and dress for dinner.

As I have already said, Miss Trevor had all the afternoon been in the best of spirits. Nothing could have been happier than her demeanour when we left the church, yet when we reached the piazza everything was changed. Apparently she was not really unhappy, nor did she look about her in the frightened way that had struck me so unpleasantly on the previous evening. It was only her manner that was strange. At first she was silent, then, as if she were afraid we might notice it, she set herself to talk as if she were so doing for mere talking's sake. Then, without any apparent reason, she became as silent as a mouse once more. Remembering what had happened that morning before breakfast, I did not question her, nor did I attempt to rally her upon the subject. To have done either would have been to have risked a recurrence of the catastrophe we had so narrowly escaped earlier in the day. I accordingly left her alone, and my wife, in the hope of distracting her attention, entered upon an amusing argument with Glenbarth upon the evils attendant upon excessive smoking, which was the young man's one, and, so far as I knew, only failing. Unable to combat her assertions he appealed to me for protection.

"Take my part, there's a good fellow," he said pathetically. "I am not strong enough to stand against Lady Hatteras alone."

"No," I returned; "you must fight your own battles. When I see a chance of having a little peace I like to grasp it. I am going to take Miss Trevor to Maya's shop on the other side of the piazza, in search of new photographs. We will leave you to quarrel in comfort here."

So saying Miss Trevor and I left them and made our way to the famous shop, where I purchased for her a number of photographs, of which she had expressed her admiration a few days before. After that we rejoined my wife and Glenbarth and returned to our hotel for dinner.

Nikola, as you may remember, had arranged to call for us with his gondola at half-past eight, and ten minutes before that time I suggested that the ladies should prepare themselves for the excursion. I bade them wrap up well, for I knew by experience that it is seldom warm upon the water at night. When they had left us the Duke and I strolled into the balcony.

"I hope to goodness Nikola won't frighten Miss Trevor this evening," said my companion, after we had been there a few moments. (I noticed that he spoke with an anxiety that was by no means usual with him.) "She is awfully sensitive, you know, and when he likes he can curdle the very marrow in your bones. I shouldn't have liked her to have heard that story he told us this morning. I suppose there is no fear of his repeating it to-night?"

"I should not think so," I returned. "Nikola has more tact in his little finger than you and I have in our whole bodies. He would be scarcely likely to make such a mistake. No, I rather fancy that to-night we shall see a new side of his character. For my own part I am prepared to confess that I am looking forward to the excursion with a good deal of pleasure."

"I am glad to hear it," Glenbarth replied, as I thought with a savour of sarcasm in his voice. "I only hope you won't have reason to regret it."

This little speech set me thinking. Was it possible that Glenbarth was jealous of Nikola? Surely he could not be foolish enough for that. That Miss Trevor had made an impression upon him was apparent, but it was full early for him to grow jealous, and particularly of such a man.

While I was thinking of this the ladies entered the room, and at the same moment we heard Nikola's gondola draw up at the steps. I thought Miss Trevor looked a little pale, but though still very quiet she was more cheerful than she had been before dinner.

"Our guide has arrived," I remarked, as I closed the windows behind us. "We had better go down to the hall. Miss Trevor, if you will accompany me, the Duke will bring Phyllis. We must not keep Nikola waiting."

We accordingly left our apartments and proceeded down-stairs.

"I trust you are looking forward to your excursion, Miss Trevor?" I said as we descended the stairs. "If I am not mistaken you will see Venice to-night under circumstances such as you could never have dreamed of before."

"I do not doubt it," she answered simply. "It will be a night to remember."

Little did she guess how true her prophecy was destined to be. It was indeed a night that every member of the party would remember all his, or her, life long. When we had reached the hall, Nikola had just entered it, and was in the act of sending up a servant to announce his arrival. He shook hands with my wife, then with Miss Trevor, afterwards with Glenbarth and myself. His hand was, as usual, as cold as ice and his face was deathly pale. His tall, lithe figure was

concealed by his voluminous coat, but what was lost in one direction was compensated for by the mystery that it imparted to his personality. For some reason I thought of Mephistopheles as I looked at him, and in many ways the illustration does not seem an altogether inapt one.

"Permit me to express the gratification I feel that you have consented to allow me to be your guide this evening, Lady Hatteras," he said as he conducted my wife towards the boat. "While it is an impertinence on my part to imagine that I can add to your enjoyment of Venice, I fancy it is, nevertheless, in my power to show you a side of the city with which you are not as yet acquainted. The night being so beautiful, and believing that you would wish to see all you can, I have brought a gondola without a cabin. I trust I did not do wrong."

"I am sure it will be delightful," my wife answered. "It would have been unendurable on such a beautiful evening to be cooped up in a close cabin. Besides, we should have seen nothing."

By this time we were on the steps, at the foot of which the gondola in question, a large one of its class, was lying. As soon as we had boarded her the gondolier bent to his oar, the boat shot out into the stream, and the excursion, which, as I have said, we were each of us to remember all our lives, had commenced. If I shut my eyes now I can recall the whole scene: the still moonlit waters of the canal, the houses on one side of which were brilliantly illuminated by the moon, the other being entirely in the shadow. When we were in mid-stream a boat decorated with lanterns passed us. It contained a merry party, whose progress was enlivened by the strains of the invariable *Finiculi Finicula*. The words and the tune ring in my memory even now. Years before we had grown heartily sick of the song, now however it possessed a charm that was quite its own.

"How pretty it is," remarked my wife and Miss Trevor almost simultaneously. And the former added, "I could never have believed that it possessed such a wealth of tenderness."

"Might it not be the association that is responsible?" put in Nikola gravely. "You have probably heard that song at some time when you have been so happy that all the world has seemed the same. Hearing it to-night has unconsciously recalled that association, and *Finiculi Finicula*, once so despised, immediately becomes a melody that touches your heart-strings, and so wins for itself a place in your regard that it can never altogether lose."

We had crossed the canal by this time; the gondola with the singers proceeding towards the Rialto bridge. The echo of the music still lingered in our ears, and seemed the sweeter by the reason of the distance that separated us from it. Turning to the gondolier, who in the moonlight presented a picturesque figure in the stern of the boat, Nikola said something in Italian. The boat's head was immediately turned in the direction of a side-street, and a moment later we entered it. It is not my intention, nor would it be possible for me, to attempt to furnish you with a definite description of the route we followed. In the daytime I flatter myself that I have a knowledge of the Venice of the tourist; if you were to give me a pencil and paper I believe I should be able to draw a rough outline of the city, and to place St. Mark's Cathedral, Galaghetti's Hotel, the Rialto bridge, the Arsenal, and certainly the railway station, in something like their proper positions. But at night, when I have left the Grand Canal, the city becomes a sealed book to me. On this particular evening every street, when once we had left the fashionable quarter behind us, seemed alike. There was the same darkness, the same silence, and the same reflection of the lights in the water. Occasionally we happened upon places where business was still being transacted, and where the noise of voices smote the air with a vehemence that was like sacrilege. A few moments would then elapse, and then we were plunged into a silence that was almost unearthly. All this time Nikola kept us continually interested. Here was a house with a history as old as Venice itself; there the home of a famous painter; yonder the birthplace of a poet or a soldier, who had fought his way to fame by pen or by sword. On one side of the street was the first dwelling of one who had been a plebeian and had died a Doge; while on the other side was that of a man who had given his life to save his friend. Nor were Nikola's illustrations confined to the past alone. Men whose names were household words to us had preceded us, and had seen Venice as we were seeing it now. Of each he could tell us something we had never heard before. It was the perfect mastery of his subject, like that of a man who plays upon an instrument of which he has made a lifelong study, that astonished us. He could rouse in our hearts such emotions as he pleased; could induce us to pity at one moment, and to loathing at the next; could make us see the city with his eyes, and in a measure to love it with his own love. That Nikola *did* entertain a deep affection for it was as certain as his knowledge of its history.

"I think I may say now," he said, when we had been absent from the hotel for upwards of an hour, "that I have furnished you with a superficial idea of the city. Let me attempt after this to show you something of its inner life. That it will repay you I think you will admit when you have seen it."

Once more he gave the gondolier an order. Without a word the man entered a narrow street on the right, then turned to the left, after which to the right again. What were we going to see next? That it would be something interesting I had not the least doubt. Presently the gondolier made an indescribable movement with his oar, the first signal that he was about to stop. With two strokes he brought the boat alongside the steps, and Nikola, who was the first to spring out, assisted the ladies to alight. We were now in a portion of Venice with which I was entirely unacquainted. The houses were old and lofty, though sadly fallen to decay. Where shops existed business was still being carried on, but the majority of the owners of the houses in the neighbourhood appeared to be early birds, for no lights were visible in their dwellings. Once or twice men approached us and stared insolently at the ladies of our party. One of these, more impertinent than his companions, placed his hand upon Miss Trevor's arm. In a second, without any apparent effort, Nikola had laid him upon his back.

"Do not be afraid, Miss Trevor," he said; "the fellow has only forgotten himself for a moment."

So saying he approached the man, who scrambled to his feet, and addressed him in a low voice.

"No, no, your excellency," the rascal whined; "for the pity of the blessed saints. Had I known it was you I would not have dared."

Nikola said something in a whisper to him; what it was I have not the least idea, but its effect was certainly excellent, for the man slunk away without another word.

After this little incident we continued our walk without further opposition, took several turnings, and at last found ourselves standing before a low doorway. That it was closely barred on the inside was evident from the sounds that followed when, in response to Nikola's knocks, some one commenced to open it. Presently an old man looked out. At first he seemed surprised to see us, but when his eyes fell upon Nikola all was changed. With a low bow he invited him, in Russian, to enter.

Crossing the threshold we found ourselves in a church of the smallest possible description. By the dim light a priest could be seen officiating at the high altar, and there were possibly a dozen worshippers present. There was an air of secrecy about it all, the light, the voices, and the precautions taken to prevent a stranger entering, that appealed to my curiosity. As we turned to leave the building the little man who had admitted us crept up to Nikola's side and said something in a low voice to him. Nikola replied, and at the same time patted the man affectionately upon the shoulder. Then with the same obsequious respect the latter opened the door once more, and permitted us to pass out, quickly barring it behind us afterwards however.

"You have seen many churches during your stay in Venice, Lady Hatteras," Nikola remarked, as we made our way back towards the gondola, "I doubt very much, however, whether you have ever entered a stranger place of worship than that."

"I know that I have not," my wife replied. "Pray who were the people we saw there? And why was so much secrecy observed?"

"Because nearly all the poor souls you saw there are either suspected or wanted by the Russian Government. They are fugitives from injustice, if I may so express it, and it is for that reason that they are compelled to worship, as well as live, in hiding."

"But who are they?"

"Nihilists," Nikola answered. "A poor, hot-headed lot of people, who, seeing their country drifting in a wrong direction, have taken it into their heads to try and remedy matters by drastic measures. Finding their efforts hopeless, their properties confiscated, and they themselves in danger of death, or exile, which is worse, they have fled from Russia. Some of them, the richest, manage to get to England, some come to Venice, but knowing that the Italian police will turn them out *sans cérémonie* if they discover them, they are compelled to remain in hiding until they are in a position to proceed elsewhere."

"And you help them?" asked Miss Trevor in a strange voice, as if his answer were a foregone conclusion.

"What makes you think that?" Nikola inquired.

"Because the doorkeeper knew you, and you spoke so kindly to him."

"The poor fellow has a son," Nikola replied; "a hot-headed young rascal who has got into trouble in Moscow. If he is caught he will without doubt go to Siberia for the rest of his life. But he will *not* be caught."

Once more Miss Trevor spoke as if with authority, and in the same hushed voice.

"You have saved him?"

"He *has* been saved," Nikola replied. "He left for America this morning. The old fellow was merely expressing to me the gratification he felt at having got him out of such a difficulty. Now, here is our gondola. Let us get into it. We still have much to see, and time is not standing still with us."

Once more we took our places, and once more the gondola proceeded on its way. To furnish you with a complete *résumé* of all we saw would take too long, and would occupy too great a space. Let it suffice that we visited places, the mere existence of which I had never heard of before.

One thing impressed me throughout. Wherever we went Nikola was known, and not only known, but feared and respected. His face was a key that opened every lock, and in his company the ladies were as safe, in the roughest parts of Venice, as if they had been surrounded by a troop of soldiery. When we had seen all that he was able to show us it was nearly midnight, and time for us to be getting back to our hotel.

"I trust I have not tired you?" he said, as the ladies took their places in the gondola for the last time.

"Not in the least," both answered at once, and I fancy my wife spoke not only for herself but also for Miss Trevor when she continued, "we have spent a most delightful evening."

"You must not praise the performance until the epilogue is spoken," Nikola answered. "I have still one more item on my programme."

As he said this the gondola drew up at some steps, where a solitary figure was standing, apparently waiting for us. He wore a cloak and carried a somewhat bulky object in his hand. As soon as the boat came alongside Nikola sprang out and approached him. To our surprise he helped him into the gondola and placed him in the stern.

"To-night, Luigi," he said, "you must sing your best for the honour of the city."

The young man replied in an undertone, and then the gondola passed down a by-street and a moment later we were back in the Grand Canal. There was not a breath of air, and the moon shone full and clear upon the placid water. Never had Venice appeared more beautiful. Away to the right was the piazza, with the Cathedral of Saint Mark; on our left were the shadows of the islands. The silence of Venice, and there is no silence in the world like it, lay upon everything. The only sound to be heard was the dripping of the water from the gondolier's oar as it rose and fell in rhythmic motion. Then the musician drew his fingers across the strings of his guitar, and after a little prelude commenced to sing. The song he had chosen was the *Salve d'amora* from *Faust*, surely one of the most delightful melodies that has ever occurred to the brain of a musician. Before he had sung a dozen bars we were entranced. Though not a strong tenor his voice was one of the most perfect I have ever heard. It was of the purest quality, so rich and sweet that the greatest connoisseur could not tire of it. The beauty of the evening, the silence of the lagoon, and the perfectness of the surroundings, helped it to appeal to us as no music had ever done before. It was a significant proof of the effect produced upon us, that when he ceased not one of us spoke for some moments. Our hearts were too full for words. By the time we had recovered ourselves the gondola had drawn up at the steps of the hotel, and we had disembarked. The Duke and I desired to reward the musician; Nikola however begged us to do nothing of the kind.

"He sings to-night to please me," he said. "It would hurt him beyond words were you to offer him any other reward."

After that there was nothing more to be said, except to thank him in the best Italian we could muster for the treat he had given us.

"Why on earth does he not try his fortune upon the stage?" asked my wife, when we had disembarked from the gondola and had assembled on the steps. "With such a voice he might achieve a European reputation."

"Alas," answered Nikola, "he will never do that. Did you notice his infirmity?"

Phyllis replied that she had not observed anything extraordinary about him.

"The poor fellow is blind," Nikola answered very quietly. "He is a singing-bird shut up always in the dark. And now, good-night. I have trespassed too long upon your time already."

He bowed low to the ladies, shook hands with the Duke and myself, and then, before we had time to thank him for the delightful evening he had given us, was in his gondola once more and out in mid-stream. We watched him until he had disappeared in the direction of the Rio del Consiglio, after we entered the hotel and made our way to our own sitting-room.

"I cannot say when I have enjoyed myself so much," said my wife, as we stood talking together before bidding each

other good-night.

"It has been delightful," said Glenbarth, whose little attack of jealousy seemed to have quite left him. "Have you enjoyed it, Hatteras?"

I said something in reply, I cannot remember what, but I recollect that, as I did so, I glanced at Miss Trevor's face. It was still very pale, but her eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance.

"I hope you have had a pleasant evening," I said to her a few moments later, when we were alone together.

"Yes, I think I can say that I have," she answered, with a far-away look upon her face. "The music was exquisite. The thought of it haunts me still."

Then, having bade me good-night, she went off with my wife, leaving me to attempt to understand why she had replied as she had done.

"And what do you think of it, my friend?" I inquired of Glenbarth, when we had taken our cigars out into the balcony.

"I am extremely glad we went," he returned quickly. "There can be no doubt that you were right when you said that it would show us Nikola's character in a new light. Did you notice with what respect he was treated by everybody we met, and how anxious they were not to run the risk of offending him?"

"Of course I noticed it, and you may be sure I drew my own conclusions from it," I replied.

"And those conclusions were?"

"That Nikola's character is even more inexplicable than before."

After that we smoked in silence for some time. At last I rose and tossed what remained of my cigar over the rails into the dark waters below.

"It is getting late," I said. "Don't you think we had better bid each other good-night?"

"Perhaps we had, and yet I don't feel a bit tired."

"Are you quite sure that you have had a pleasant day?"

"Quite sure," he said, with a laugh. "The only thing I regret is having heard that wretched story this morning. Do you recall the gusto with which Nikola related it?"

I replied in the affirmative, and asked him his reason for referring to it now.

"Because I could not help thinking of it this evening, when his voice was so pleasant and his manner so kind. When I picture him going back to that house to-night, to that dreadful room, to sleep alone in that great building, it fairly makes me shudder. Good-night, old fellow. You have treated me royally to-day; I could scarcely have had more sensations compressed into my waking hours if I'd been a king."



CHAPTER 59

After our excursion through Venice with Nikola by night, an interval of a week elapsed before we saw anything of him. During that time matters, so far as our party was concerned, progressed with the smoothness of a well-regulated clock. In my own mind I had not the shadow of a doubt that Glenbarth was head over ears in love with Gertrude Trevor. He followed her about wherever she went; seemed never to tire of paying her attention, and whenever we were alone together, endeavoured to inveigle me into a discussion of her merits. That she had faults nothing would convince him.

Whether she reciprocated his good-feeling was a matter which, to my mind, there existed a considerable amount of doubt. Women are proverbially more secretive in these affairs than men, and if Miss Trevor entertained a warmer feeling than friendship for the young Duke, she certainly managed to conceal it admirably. More than once, I believe, my wife endeavoured to sound her upon the subject. She had to confess herself beaten, however. Miss Trevor liked the Duke of Glenbarth very much; she was quite agreed that he had not an atom of conceit in his constitution; he gave himself no airs; moreover, she was prepared to meet my wife half-way, and to say that she thought it a pity he did not marry. No, she had never heard that there was an American millionaire girl, extremely beautiful, and accomplished beyond the average, who was pining to throw her millions and herself at his feet! "And then," added my wife, in a tone that seemed to suggest that she considered it my fault that the matter had not been brought to a successful conclusion long since, "what do you think she said? 'Why on earth doesn't he marry this American? So many men of title do now-a-days.' What do you think of that? I can tell you, Dick, I could have shaken her!"

"My dear little woman," I said in reply, "will nothing convince you that you are playing with fire? If you are not very careful you will burn your fingers. Gertrude is almost as clever as you are. She sees that you are trying to pump her, and very naturally declines to be pumped. You would feel as she does were you in her position."

"I do not know why you should say I am trying to pump her," she answered with considerable dignity. "I consider it a very uncalled-for expression."

"Well, my dear," I answered, "if you are going to attempt to improve your position by splitting straws, then I must stop."

The episode I have just described had taken place after we had retired for the night, and at a time when I am far from being at my best. My wife, on the other hand, as I have repeatedly noticed, is invariably wide-awake at that hour. Moreover she has an established belief that it would be an impossibility for her to obtain any rest until she has cleared up all matters of mystery that may have attracted her attention during the day. I generally fall asleep before she is half-way through, and for this reason I am told that I lack interest in what most nearly concerns our welfare.

"One would at least imagine that you could remain awake to discuss events of so much importance to us and to those about us," I have known her say. "I have observed that you can talk about horses, hunting, and shooting, with your bachelor friends until two or three o'clock in the morning without falling asleep, but when your wife is anxious to ask your opinion about something that does not concern your amusements, then you must needs go to sleep."

"My dear," I replied, "when all is said and done we are but human. You know as well as I do, that if a man were to come to me when I had settled down for the night, and were to tell me that he knew where to lay his hand upon the finest horse in England, and where he could put me on to ten coveys of partridges within a couple of hundred yards of my own front door, that he could even tell me the winner of the Derby, I should answer him as I am now answering you."

"And your reply would be?"

I am afraid the pains I had been at to illustrate my own argument must have proved too much for me, for I was informed in the morning that I had talked a vast amount of nonsense about seeing Nikola concerning a new pigeon-trap, and had then resigned myself to the arms of Morpheus. If there should be any husbands whose experience have run on similar lines, I should be glad to hear from them. But to return to my story.

One evening, exactly a week after Glenbarth's arrival in Venice, I was dressing for dinner when a letter was brought to me. Much to my surprise I found it was from Nikola, and in it he inquired whether it would be possible for me to spare the time to come and see him that evening. It appeared that he was anxious to discuss a certain important matter with me. I

noticed, however, that he did not mention what that matter was. In a postscript he asked me, as a favour to himself, to come alone.

Having read the letter I stood for a few moments with it in my hand, wondering what I should do. I was not altogether anxious to go out that evening; on the other hand I had a strange craving to see Nikola once more. The suggestion that he desired to consult me upon a matter of importance flattered my vanity, particularly as it was of such a nature that he did not desire the presence of a third person. "Yes," I thought, "after all I will go." Accordingly I wrote a note to him saying that, if the hour would suit him, I hoped to be with him at half-past nine o'clock. Then I continued my dressing and presently went down to dinner.

During the progress of the meal I mentioned the fact that I had received the letter in question, and asked my friends if they would excuse me if I went round in the course of the evening to find out what it was that Nikola had to say to me. Perhaps by virtue of my early training, perhaps by natural instinct, I am a keen observer of trifles. On this occasion I noticed that from the moment I mentioned the fact of my having received a letter from Nikola, Miss Trevor ate scarcely any more dinner. Upon my mentioning his name she had looked at me with a startled expression upon her face. She said nothing, however, but I observed that her left hand, which she had a trick of keeping below the table as much as possible, was for some moments busily engaged in picking pieces from the roll beside her plate. For some reason she had suddenly grown nervous again, but why she should have done so passes my comprehension. When the ladies had retired, and we were sitting together over our wine, Glenbarth returned to the subject of my visit that evening.

"By Jove, my dear fellow," he said, "I don't envy you your excursion to that house. Don't you feel a bit nervous about it yourself?"

I shook my head.

"Why should I?" I asked. "If the truth must be told I am a good deal more afraid of Nikola than I am of his house. I don't fancy on the present occasion, however, I have any reason to dread either."

"Well," said the Duke with a laugh, "if you are not home by breakfast-time to-morrow morning I shall bring the police round, and look down that trap-door. You'll take a revolver with you of course?"

"I shall do nothing of the kind," I replied. "I am quite able to take care of myself without having recourse to fire-arms."

Nevertheless, when I went up to my room to change my coat, prior to leaving the house, I took a small revolver from my dressing-case and weighed it in my hand. "Shall I take it or shall I not?" was the question I asked myself. Eventually I shook my head and replaced it in its hiding-place. Then, switching off the electric light, I made for the door, only to return, re-open the dressing-case, and take out the revolver. Without further argument I slipped it into the pocket of my coat and then left the room.

A quarter of an hour later my gondolier had turned into the Rio del Consiglio, and was approaching the Palace Revecce. The house was in deep shadow, and looked very dark and lonesome. The gondolier seemed to be of the same opinion, for he was anxious to set me down, to collect his fare, and to get away again as soon as possible. Standing in the porch I rang the great bell which Nikola had pointed out to me, and which we had not observed on the morning of our first visit. It clanged and echoed somewhere in the rearmost portion of the house, intensifying the loneliness of the situation and adding a new element of mystery to that abominable dwelling. In spite of my boast to Glenbarth I was not altogether at my ease. It was one thing to pretend that I had no objection to the place when I was seated in a well-lighted room, with a glass of port at my hand, and a stalwart friend opposite; it was quite another, however, to be standing in the dark at that ancient portal, with the black water of the canal at my feet and the anticipation of that sombre room ahead. Then I heard the sound of footsteps crossing the courtyard, and a moment later Nikola himself stood before me and invited me to enter. A solitary lamp had been placed upon the coping of the wall, and its fitful light illuminated the courtyard, throwing long shadows across the pavement and making it look even drearier and more unwholesome than when I had last seen it. After we had shaken hands we made our way in silence up the great staircase, our steps echoing along the stone corridors with startling reverberations. How thankful I was at last to reach the warm, well-lit room, despite the story Nikola had told us about it, I must leave you to imagine.

"Please sit down," said Nikola, pushing a chair forward for my occupation. "It is exceedingly kind of you to have complied with my request. I trust Lady Hatteras and Miss Trevor are well?"

"Thank you, they are both well," I replied. "They both begged to be remembered to you."

Nikola bowed his thanks, and then, when he had placed a box of excellent cigars at my elbow, prepared and lighted a cigarette for himself. All this time I was occupying myself wondering why he had asked me to come to him that evening, and what the upshot of the interview was to be. Knowing him as I did, I was aware that his actions were never motiveless. Everything he did was to be accounted for by some very good reason. After he had tendered his thanks to me for coming to see him, he was silent for some minutes, for so long indeed that I began to wonder whether he had forgotten my presence. In order to attract his attention I commented upon the fact that we had not seen him for more than a week.

"I have been away," he answered, with what was plainly an attempt to pull himself together. "Business of a most important nature called me to the south of Italy, to Naples in fact, and I only returned this morning."

Once more he was silent. Then leaning towards me and speaking with even greater impressiveness than he had yet done, he continued —

"Hatteras, I am going to ask you a question, and then, with your permission, I should like to tell you a story."

Not knowing what else to do I simply bowed. I was more than ever convinced that Nikola was going to make use of me.

"Have you ever wondered," he began, still looking me straight in the face, and speaking with great earnestness, "what it was first made me the man I am?"

I replied to the effect that I had often wondered, but naturally had never been able to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

"Some day you shall know the history of my life," he answered. "But not just yet. There is much to be done before then. And now I am going to give you the story I promised you. You will see why I have told it to you when I have finished."

He rose from his chair and began to pace the room. I had never seen Nikola so agitated before. When he turned and faced me again his eyes shone like diamonds, while his body quivered with suppressed excitement.

"Hatteras," he went on, when he had somewhat mastered his emotion, "I doubt very much if ever in this world's history there has been a man who has suffered more than I have done. As I said just now, the whole story I cannot tell you at present. Some day it will come in its proper place and you will know everything. In the meantime —"

He paused for a few moments and then continued abruptly —

"The story concerns a woman, a native of this city; the last of an impoverished, but ancient family. She married a man many years her senior, whom she did not love. When they had been married just over four years her husband died, leaving her with one child to fight the battles of the world alone. The boy was nearly three years old, a sturdy, clever little urchin, who, up to that time, had never known the meaning of the word trouble. Then there came to Venice a man, a Spaniard, as handsome as a serpent, and as cruel. After a while he made the woman believe that he loved her. She returned his affection, and in due time they were married. A month later he was appointed Governor of one of the Spanish islands off the American coast — a post he had long been eager to obtain. When he departed to take up his position it was arranged that, as soon as all was prepared, the woman and her child should follow him. They did so, and at length reached the island and took up their abode, not at the palace, as the woman had expected, but in the native city. For the Governor feared, or pretended to fear, that, as his marriage had not been made public at first, it might compromise his position. The woman, however, who loved him, was content, for her one thought was to promote his happiness. At first the man made believe to be overjoyed at having her with him once again, then, little by little, he showed that he was tired of her. Another woman had attracted his fancy, and he had transferred his affections to her. The other heard of it. Her southern blood was roused, for though she had been poor, she was, as I have said, the descendant of one of the oldest Venetian families. As his wife she endeavoured to defend herself, then came the crushing blow, delivered with all the brutality of a savage nature.

"You are not my wife," he said. "I had already a wife living when I married you."

"She left him without another word and went away to hide her shame. Six months later the fever took her and she died. Thus the boy was left, at five years old, without a friend or protector in the world. Happily, however, a humble couple took compassion on him, and, after a time, determined to bring him up as their own. The old man was a great scholar, and had devoted all his life to the exhaustive study of the occult sciences. To educate the boy, when he grew old enough to understand, was his one delight. He was never weary of teaching him, nor did the boy ever tire of learning. It was a mutual labour of love. Seven years later saw both the lad's benefactors at rest in the little churchyard beneath the palms, and the boy himself homeless once more. But he was not destined to remain so for very long; the priest, who had buried his adopted parents, spoke to the Governor, little dreaming what he was doing, of the boy's pitiable condition. It was as if the

devil had prompted him, for the Spaniard was anxious to find a playfellow for his son, a lad two years the other's junior. It struck him that the waif would fill the position admirably. He was accordingly deported to the palace to enter upon the most miserable period of his life. His likeness to his mother was unmistakable, and when he noticed it, the Governor, who had learned the secret, hated him for it, as only those hate who are conscious of their wrong-doing. From that moment his cruelty knew no bounds. The boy was powerless to defend himself. All that he could do was to loathe his oppressor with all the intensity of his fiery nature, and to pray that the day might come when he should be able to repay. To his own son the Governor was passionately attached. In his eyes the latter could do no wrong. For any of his misdeeds it was the stranger who bore the punishment. On the least excuse he was stripped and beaten like a slave. The Governor's son, knowing his power, and the other's inordinate sensitiveness, derived his chief pleasure in inventing new cruelties for him. To describe all that followed would be impossible. When nothing else would rouse him, it was easy to bring him to an ungovernable pitch of fury by insulting his mother's name, with whose history the servants had, by this time, made their master's son acquainted. Once, driven into a paroxysm of fury by the other's insults, the lad picked up a knife and rushed at his tormentor with the intention of stabbing him. His attempt, however, failed, and the boy, foaming at the mouth, was carried before the Governor. I will spare you a description of the punishment that was meted out for his offence. Let it suffice that there are times even now, when the mere thought of it is sufficient to bring — but there — why should I continue in this strain? All that I am telling you happened many years ago, but the memory remains clear and distinct, while the desire for vengeance is as keen as if it had happened but yesterday. What is more, the end is coming, as surely as the lad once hoped and prophesied it would."

Nikola paused for a moment and sank into his chair. I had never seen him so affected. His face was deathly pale, while his eyes blazed like living coals.

"What became of the boy at last?" I inquired, knowing all the while that he had been speaking of himself.

"He escaped from the island, and went out into the world. The Governor is dead; he has gone to meet the woman, or women, he has so cruelly wronged. His son has climbed the ladder of Fame, but he has never lost, as his record shows, the cruel heart he possessed as a boy. Do you remember the story of the Revolution in the Republic of Equinata?"

I shook my head.

"The Republics of South America indulge so constantly in their little amusements that it is difficult for an outsider to remember every particular one," I answered.

"Well, let me tell you about it. When the Republic of Equinata suffered from its first Revolution, this man was its President. But for his tyranny and injustice it would not have taken place. He it was who, finding that the Rebellion was spreading, captured a certain town, and bade the eldest son of each of the influential families wait upon him at his headquarters on the morning following its capitulation. His excuse was that he desired them as hostages for their parents' good behaviour. As it was, however, to wreak his vengeance on the city, which had opposed him, instead of siding with him, he placed them against a wall and shot them down by the half-dozen. But he was not destined to succeed. Gradually he was driven back upon his Capital, his troops deserting day by day. Then, one night he boarded a ship that was waiting for him in the harbour, and from that moment Equinata saw him no more. It was not until some days afterwards that it was discovered that he had despatched vast sums of money, which he had misappropriated, out of the country, ahead of him. Where he is now hiding I am the only man who knows. I have tracked him to his lair, and I am waiting — waiting — waiting — for the moment to arrive when the innocent blood that has so long cried to Heaven will be avenged. Let him look to himself when that day arrives. For as there is a God above us, he will be punished as man was never punished before."

The expression upon his face as he said this was little short of devilish; the ghastly pallor of his skin, the dark, glittering eyes, and his jet-black hair made up a picture that will never fade from my memory.

"God help his enemy if they should meet," I said to myself. Then his mood suddenly changed, and he was once more the quiet, suave Nikola to whom I had become accustomed. Every sign of passion had vanished from his face. A transformation more complete could scarcely have been imagined.

"My dear fellow," he said, without a trace of emotion in his voice, "you must really forgive me for having bored you with my long story. I cannot think what made me do so, unless it is that I have been brooding over it all day, and felt the need of a confidant. You will make an allowance for me, will you not?"

"Most willingly," I answered. "If the story you have told me concerns yourself, you have my most heartfelt sympathy.

You have suffered indeed."

He stopped for a moment in his restless walk up and down the room, and eyed me carefully as if he were trying to read my thoughts.

"Suffered?" he said at last, and then paused. "Yes, I have suffered — but others have suffered more. But do not let us talk of it. I was foolish to have touched upon it, for I know by experience the effect it produces upon me."

As he spoke he crossed to the window, which he threw open. It was a glorious night, and the sound of women's voices singing reached us from the Grand Canal. On the other side of the watery highway the houses looked strangely mysterious in the weird light. At that moment I felt more drawn towards Nikola than I had ever done before. The man's loneliness, his sufferings, had a note of singular pathos for me. I forgot the injuries he had done me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had placed my hand upon his shoulder.

"Nikola," I said, "if I were to try I could not make you understand how truly sorry I am for you. The life you lead is so unlike that of any other man. You see only the worst side of Human Nature. Why not leave this terrible gloom? Give up these experiments upon which you are always engaged, and live only in the pure air of the commonplace every-day world. Your very surroundings — this house, for instance — are not like those of other men. Believe me, there are other things worth living for besides the Science which binds you in its chains. If you could learn to love a good woman —"

"My dear Hatteras," he put in, more softly than I had ever heard him speak, "woman's love is not for me. As you say, I am lonely in the world, God knows how lonely, yet lonely I must be content to remain." Then leaning his hands upon the window-sill, he looked out upon the silent night, and I heard him mutter to himself, "Yes, lonely to the End." After that he closed the window abruptly, and turning to me, asked how long we contemplated remaining in Venice.

"I cannot say yet," I answered, "the change is doing my wife so much good that I am anxious to prolong our stay. At first we thought of going to the South of France, but that idea has been abandoned, and we may be here another month."

"A month," he said to himself, as if he were reflecting upon something; then he added somewhat inconsequently, "You should be able to see a great deal of Venice in a month."

"And how long will you be here?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"It is impossible to say," he answered. "I never know my own mind for two days together. I may be here another week, or I may be here a year. Somehow, I have a conviction, I cannot say why, that this will prove to be my last visit to Venice. I should be sorry never to see it again, yet what must be, must. Destiny will have its way, whatever we may say or do to the contrary."

At that moment there was the sound of a bell clanging in the courtyard below. At such an hour it had an awe-inspiring sound, and I know that I shuddered as I heard it.

"Who can it be?" said Nikola, turning towards the door. "This is somewhat late for calling hours. Will you excuse me if I go down and find out the meaning of it?"

"Do so, by all means," I answered. "I think I must be going also. It is getting late."

"No, no," he said, "stay a little longer. If it is as I suspect, I fancy I shall be able to show you something that may interest you. Endeavour to make yourself comfortable until I return. I shall not be away many minutes."

So saying, he left me, closing the door behind him. When I was alone, I lit a cigar and strolled to the window, which I opened. My worst enemy could not call me a coward, but I must confess that I derived no pleasure from being in that room alone. The memory of what lay under that oriental rug was vividly impressed upon my memory. In my mind I could smell the vaults below, and it would have required only a very small stretch of the imagination to have fancied I could hear the groans of the dying man proceeding from it. Then a feeling of curiosity came over me to see who Nikola's visitor was. By leaning well out of the window, I could look down on the great door below. At the foot of the steps a gondola was drawn up, but I was unable to see whether there was any one in it or not. Who was Nikola's mysterious caller, and what made him come at such an hour? Knowing the superstitious horror in which the house was held by the populace of Venice, I felt that whoever he was, he must have had an imperative reason for his visit. I was still turning the subject over in my mind, when the door opened and Nikola entered, followed by two men. One was tall and swarthy, wore a short black beard, and had a crafty expression upon his face. The other was about middle height, very broad, and was the possessor of a bullet-head covered with close-cropped hair. Both were of the lower class, and their nationality was unmistakable. Turning to me,

Nikola said in English —

“It is as I expected. Now, if you care to study character, here is your opportunity. The taller man is a Police Agent, the other the chief of a notorious Secret Society. I should first explain that within the last two or three days I have been helping a young Italian of rather advanced views, not to put too fine a point upon it, to leave the country for America. This dog has dared to try to upset my plans. Immediately I heard of it I sent word to him, by means of our friend here, that he was to present himself here before twelve o’clock to-night without fail. From his action it would appear that he is more frightened of me than he is of the Secret Society. That is as it should be; for I intend to teach him a little lesson which will prevent him from interfering with my plans in the future. You were talking of my science just now, and advising me to abandon it. Could the life you offer me give me the power I possess now? Could the respectability of Clapham recompense me for the knowledge with which the East can furnish me?”

Then turning to the Police Agent he addressed him in Italian, speaking so fast that it was impossible for me to follow him. From what little I could make out, however, I gathered that he was rating him for daring to interfere with his concerns. When, at the end of three or four minutes, he paused and spoke more slowly, this was the gist of his speech —

“You know me and the power I control. You are aware that those who thwart me, or who interfere with me and my concerns, do so at their own risk. Since no harm has come of it, thanks to certain good friends, I will forgive on this occasion, but let it happen again and this is what your end will be.”

As he spoke he took from his pocket a small glass bottle with a gold top, not unlike a vinaigrette, and emptied some of the white powder it contained into the palm of his hand. Turning down the lamp he dropped this into the chimney. A green

flame shot up for a moment, which was succeeded by a cloud of perfumed smoke that filled the room so completely that for a moment it was impossible for us to see each other. Presently a picture shaped itself in the cloud and held my attention spell-bound. Little by little it developed until I was able to make out a room, or rather I should say a vault, in which upwards of a dozen men were seated at a long table. They were all masked, and without exception were clad in long monkish robes with cowls of black cloth. Presently a sign was made by the man at the head of the table, an individual with a venerable grey beard, and two more black figures entered, who led a man between them. Their prisoner was none other than the Police Agent whom Nikola had warned. He looked thinner, however, and was evidently much frightened by his position. Once more the man at the head of the table raised his hand, and there entered at the other side an old man, with white hair and a long beard of the same colour. Unlike the others he wore no cowl, nor was he masked. From his gestures I could see that he was addressing those seated at the table, and, as he pointed to the prisoner, a look of undying hatred spread over his face. Then the man at the head of the table rose, and though I could hear nothing of what he said, I gathered that he was addressing his brethren concerning the case. When he had finished, and each of the assembly had voted by holding up his hand, he turned to the prisoner. As he did so the scene vanished instantly and another took its place.

It was a small room that I looked upon now, furnished only with a bed, a table, and a chair. At the door was a man who had figured as a prisoner in the previous picture, but now sadly changed. He seemed to have shrunk to half his former size, his face was pinched by starvation, his eyes were sunken, but there was an even greater look of terror in them than had been there before. Opening the door of the room he listened, and then shut and locked it again. It was as if he were afraid to go out, and yet knew that if he remained where he was, he must perish of starvation. Gradually the room began to grow dark, and the terrified wretch paced restlessly up and down, listening at the door every now and then. Once more the picture vanished as its companion had done, and a third took its place. This proved to be a narrow street-scene by moonlight. On either side the houses towered up towards the sky, and since there was no one about, it was plain that the night was far advanced. Presently, creeping along in the shadow, on the left-hand side, searching among the refuse and garbage of the street for food, came the man I had seen afraid to leave his attic. Times out of number he looked swiftly behind him, as if he thought it possible that he might be followed. He was but little more than half-way up the street, and was stooping to pick up something, when two dark figures emerged from a passage on the left, and swiftly approached him. Before he had time to defend himself, they were upon him, and a moment later he was lying stretched out upon his back in the middle of the street, a dead man. The moon shone down full and clear upon his face, the memory of which makes me shudder even now. Then the picture faded away and the room was light once more. Instinctively I looked at the Police Agent. His usually swarthy face was deathly pale, and from the great beads of perspiration that stood upon his forehead, I gathered that he had seen the picture too.

"Now," said Nikola, addressing him, "you have seen what is in store for you if you persist in pitting yourself against me. You recognized that grey-haired man, who had appealed to the Council against you. Then, rest assured of this! So surely as you continue your present conduct, so surely will the doom I have just revealed to you overtake you. Now go, and remember what I have said."

Turning to the smaller man, Nikola placed his hand in a kindly fashion upon his shoulder.

"You have done well, Tomasso," he said, "and I am pleased with you. Drop our friend here at the usual place, and see that some one keeps an eye on him. I don't think, however, he will dare to offend again."

On hearing this, the two men left the room and descended to the courtyard together, and I could easily imagine with what delight one of them would leave the house. When they had gone, Nikola, who was standing at the window, turned to me, saying —

"What do you think of my conjuring?"

I knew not what answer to make that would satisfy him. The whole thing seemed so impossible that, had it not been for the pungent odour that still lingered in the room, I could have believed I had fallen asleep and dreamed it all.

"You can give me no explanation, then?" said Nikola, with one of his inscrutable smiles. "And yet, having accumulated this power, this knowledge, call it what you will, you would still bid me give up Science. Come, my friend, you have seen something of what I can do; would you be brave enough to try, with my help, to look into what is called The Great Unknown, and see what the Future has in store for you? I fancy it could be done. Are you to be tempted to see your own

end?"

"No, no," I cried, "I will have nothing to do with such an unholy thing. Good heavens, man! from that moment life would be unendurable!"

"You think so, do you?" he said slowly, still keeping his eyes fixed on me. "And yet I have tried it myself."

"My God, Nikola!" I answered in amazement, for I knew him well enough to feel sure that he was not talking idly, "you don't mean to tell me that you know what your own end is going to be?"

"Exactly," he answered. "I have seen it all. It is not pleasant; but I think I may say without vanity that it will be an end worthy of myself."

"But now that you know it, can you not avert it?"

"Nothing can be averted," he answered solemnly. "As I said before these men entered, what must be, must. What does Schiller say? '*Noch niemand entfloh dem verhangten Geschick.*'"

"And you were brave enough to look?"

"Does it require so much bravery, do you think? Believe me, there are things which require more."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah! I cannot tell you now," he answered, shaking his head. "Some day you will know."

Then there was a silence for a few seconds, during which we both stood looking down at the moonlit water below. At last, having consulted my watch and seeing how late it was, I told him that it was time for me to bid him good-night.

"I am very grateful to you for coming, Hatteras," he said. "It has cheered me up. It does me good to see you. Through you I get a whiff of that other life of which you spoke a while back. I want to make you like me, and I fancy I am succeeding."

Then we left the room together, and went down the stairs to the courtyard below. Side by side we stood upon the steps waiting for a gondola to put in an appearance. It was some time before one came in sight, but when it did so I hailed it, and then shook Nikola by the hand and bade him good-night.

"Good-night," he answered. "Pray remember me kindly to Lady Hatteras and to — Miss Trevor."

The little pause before Miss Trevor's name caused me to look at him in some surprise. He noticed it and spoke at once.

"You may think it strange of me to say so," he said, "but I cannot help feeling interested in that young lady. Impossible though it may seem, I have a well-founded conviction that in some way her star is destined to cross mine, and before very long. I have only seen her twice in my life in the flesh; but many years ago her presence on the earth was revealed to me, and I was warned that some day we should meet. What that meeting will mean to me it is impossible to say, but in its own good time Fate will doubtless tell me. And now, once more, good-night."

"Good-night," I answered mechanically, for I was too much surprised by his words to think what I was saying. Then I entered the gondola and bade the man take me back to my hotel.

"Surely Nikola has taken leave of his senses," I said to myself as I was rowed along. "Gertrude Trevor was the very last person in the world that I should have expected Nikola to make such a statement about."

At this point, however, I remembered how curiously she had been affected by their first meeting, and my mind began to be troubled concerning her.

"Let us hope and pray that Nikola doesn't take it into his head to imagine himself in love with her," I continued to myself. "If he were to do so I scarcely know what the consequences would be."

Then, with a touch of the absurd, I wondered what her father, the eminently respected dean, would say to having Nikola for a son-in-law. By the time I had reached this point in my reverie the gondola had drawn up at the steps of the hotel.

My wife and Miss Trevor had gone to bed, but Glenbarth was sitting up for me.

"Well, you have paid him a long visit, in all conscience," he said a little reproachfully. Then he added, with what was intended to be a touch of sarcasm, "I hope you have spent a pleasant evening?"

"I am not quite so certain about that," I replied. "Indeed. Then what have you discovered?"

"One thing of importance," I answered; "that Nikola grows more and more inscrutable everyday."

CHAPTER 60

The more I thought upon my strange visit to the Palace Revecce that evening, the more puzzled I was by it. It had so many sides, and each so complex, that I scarcely knew which presented the most curious feature. What Nikola's real reason had been for inviting me to call upon him, and why he should have told me the story, which I felt quite certain was that of his own life, was more than I could understand. Moreover, why, having told it me, he should have so suddenly requested me to think no more about it, only added to my bewilderment. The incident of the two men, and the extraordinary conjuring trick, for conjuring trick it certainly was in the real meaning of the word, he had shown us, did not help to elucidate matters. If the truth must be told it rather added to the mystery than detracted from it. To sum it all up, I found, when I endeavoured to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, remembering also his strange remark concerning Miss Trevor, that I was as far from coming to any conclusion as I had been at the beginning.

"You can have no idea how nervous I have been on your account to-night," said my wife, when I reached her room. "After dinner the Duke gave us a description of Doctor Nikola's room, and told us its history. When I thought of your being there alone with him, I must confess I felt almost inclined to send a message to you imploring you to come home."

"That would have been a great mistake, my dear," I answered. "You would have offended Nikola, and we don't want to do that. I am sorry the Duke told you that terrible story. He should not have frightened you with it. What did Gertrude Trevor think of it?"

"She did not say anything about it," my wife replied. "But I could see that she was as frightened as I was. I am quite sure you would not get either of us to go there, however pressing Doctor Nikola's invitation might be. Now tell me what he wanted to see you about."

"He felt lonely and wanted some society," I answered, having resolved that on no account would I tell her all the truth concerning my visit to the Palace Revecce. "He also wanted me to witness something connected with a scheme he has originated for enabling people to get out of the country unobserved by the police. Before I left he gave me a good example of the power he possessed."

I then described to her the arrival of the two men and the lesson Nikola had read to the Police Agent. The portion dealing with the conjuring trick I omitted. No good could have accrued from frightening her, and I knew that the sort of description I should be able to give of it would not be sufficiently impressive to enable her to see it in the light I desired. In any other way it would have struck her as ridiculous.

"The man grows more and more extraordinary every day," she said. "And not the least extraordinary thing about him is the way he affects other people. For my own part I must confess that, while I fear him, I like him; the Duke is frankly afraid of him; you are interested and repelled in turn; while Gertrude, I fancy, regards him as a sort of supernatural being, who may turn one into a horse or a dog at a moment's notice, while Senor Galaghetti, with whom I had a short conversation to-day concerning him, was so enthusiastic in his praises that for once words failed him. He had never met any one so wonderful, he declared. He would lay down his life for him. It would appear that, on one occasion, when Nikola was staying at the hotel, he cured Galaghetti's eldest child of diphtheria. The child was at the last gasp and the doctors had given her up, when Nikola made his appearance upon the scene. What he did, or how he did it, Galaghetti did not tell me, but it must have been something decidedly irregular, for the other doctors were aghast and left the house in a body. The child, however, rallied from that moment, and, as Galaghetti proudly informed me, 'is now de artiste of great repute upon de pianoforte in Paris.' I have never heard of her, but it would appear that Galaghetti not only attributes her life, but also her musical success, to the fact that Nikola was staying in the hotel at the time when the child was taken ill. The Duke was with me when Galaghetti told me this, and, when he heard it, he turned away with an exclamation that sounded very like 'humbug!' I do hope that Doctor Nikola and the Duke won't quarrel?"

As she put this in the form of a question, I felt inclined to reply with the expression the Duke had used. I did not do so, however, but contented myself with assuring her that she need have no fears upon that score. A surprise, however, was in store for me.

"What have they to quarrel about?" I asked. "They have nothing in common."

"That only proves how blind you are to what goes on around you," my wife replied. "Have you not noticed that they

both admire Gertrude Trevor?"

Falling so pat upon my own thoughts, this gave me food for serious reflection.

"How do you know that Nikola admires her?" I asked, a little sharply, I fear, for when one has uncomfortable suspicions one is not always best pleased to find that another shares them. A double suspicion might be described as almost amounting to a certainty.

"I am confident of it," she replied. "Did you not notice his manner towards her on the night of our excursion? It was most marked."

"My dear girl," I said irritably, "if you are going to begin this sort of thing, you don't know where you will find yourself in the end. Nikola has been a wanderer all his life. He has met people of every nationality, of every rank and description. It is scarcely probable, charming though I am prepared to admit she is, that he would be attracted by our friend. Besides, I had it from his own lips this morning that he will never marry."

"You may be just as certain as you please," she answered. "Nevertheless, I adhere to my opinion."

Knowing what was in my own mind, and feeling that if the argument continued I might let something slip that I should regret, I withdrew from the field, and, having questioned her concerning certain news she had received from England that day, bade her good-night.

Next morning we paid a visit to the Palace of the Doges, and spent a pleasant and instructive couple of hours in the various rooms. Whatever *Nikola's* feelings may have been, there was by this time not the least doubt that the Duke admired Miss Trevor. Though the lad had known her for so short a time he was already head over ears in love. I think Gertrude was aware of the fact, and I feel sure that she liked him, but whether the time was not yet ripe, or her feminine instinct warned her to play her fish for a while before attempting to land him, I cannot say; at any rate she more than once availed herself of an opportunity and moved away from him to take her place at my side. As you may suppose, Glenbarth was not rendered any the happier by these manoeuvres; indeed, by the time we left the Palace, he was as miserable a human being as could have been found in all Venice. Before lunch, however, she relented a little towards him, and when we sat down to the meal in question our friend had in some measure recovered his former spirits. Not so my wife, however; though I did not guess it, I was in for a wiggling.

"How could you treat the poor fellow so badly?" she said indignantly, when we were alone together afterwards. "If you are not very careful you'll spoil everything."

"Spoil what?" I inquired, as if I did not understand to what she alluded. "You have lately developed a habit of speaking in riddles."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" she answered scornfully, "you know very well to what I allude. I think your conduct at the Palace this morning was disgraceful. You, a married man and a father, to try and spoil the pleasure of that poor young man."

"But she began it," I answered in self-defence. "Did you not see that she preferred my company to his?"

"Of course that was only make-believe," my wife replied. "You are as well aware of that as I am."

"I know nothing of the kind," I returned. "If the girl does not know her own mind, then it is safer that she should pretend, as she did to-day."

"She was not pretending. You know that Gertrude Trevor is as honest as the day."

"Then you admit that she was only playing her fish?" I said.

"If you are going to be vulgar I shall leave you," she retorted; "I don't know what you mean by 'playing her fish.' Gertrude only came to you because she did not want to allow her liking for the Duke to appear too conspicuous."

"It's the same thing in the end," I answered. "Believe me it is! You describe it as not making her conduct appear too conspicuous, while I call it 'playing her fish.' I have the best possible recollection of a young lady who used to play quoits with me on the deck of the *Orotava* a good many years ago. One day — we were approaching Naples at the time — she played game after game with the doctor, and snubbed me unmercifully."

"You know very well that I didn't mean it," she answered, with a stamp of her foot. "You know I had to act as I did."

"I don't mind admitting that," I replied. "Nevertheless, you were playing your fish. That night after dinner you forgave me and —"

She slipped her arm through mine and gave it a hug. I could afford to be generous.

"Those were dear old days, were they not? I, for one, am not going to quarrel about them. Now let us go and find the others."

We discovered them in the balcony, listening to some musicians in a gondola below. Miss Trevor plainly hailed our coming with delight; the Duke, however, was by no means so well pleased. He did his best, however, to conceal his chagrin. Going to the edge of the balcony I looked down at the boat. The musicians were four in number, two men and two girls, and, at the moment of our putting in an appearance, one of them was singing the "Ave Maria" from the *Cavalleria Rusticana*, in a manner that I had seldom heard it sung before. She was a handsome girl, and knew the value of her good looks. Beside her stood a man with a guitar, and I gave a start as I looked at him. Did my eyes deceive me, or was this the man who had accompanied the Police Agent to Nikola's residence on the previous evening? I looked again and felt sure that I could not be mistaken. He possessed the same bullet-head with the close-cropped hair, the same clean-shaven face, and the same peculiarly square shoulders. No! I felt sure that he was the man. But if so, what was he doing here under our windows? One thing was quite apparent; if he recognized me, he did not give me evidence of the fact. He played and looked up at us without the slightest sign of recognition. To all intents and purposes he was the picture of indifference. While they were performing I recalled the scene of the previous night, and wondered what had become of the police officer, and what the man below me had thought of the curious trick Nikola had performed? It was only when they had finished their entertainment and, having received our reward, were about to move away that I received any information to the effect that the man had recognized me.

"Illustrious Senora, Seniorita, and Senors, I thank you," he said, politely lifting his hat as he spoke. "Our performance has been successful, and the obstacle which threatened it at one time has been removed."

The gondola then passed on, and I turned to the Duke as if for an explanation.

"At first the hall-porter was not inclined to let them sing here," the Duke remarked, "but Miss Trevor wanted to hear them, so I sent word down that I wished them to remain."

In spite of the explanation I understood to what the man had referred, but for the life of me I could not arrive at his reason for visiting our hotel that day. I argued that it might have been all a matter of chance, but I soon put that idea aside as absurd. The coincidence was too remarkable.

At lunch my wife announced that she had heard that morning that Lady Beltringham, the wife of our neighbour in the Forest, was in Venice, and staying at a certain hotel further along the Grand Canal.

"Gertrude and I are going to call upon her this afternoon," she said, "so that you two gentlemen must amuse yourselves as best you can without us."

"That is very easily done," I answered; "the Duke is going to have his hair cut, and I am going to witness the atrocity. You may expect to see him return not unlike that man with the guitar in the boat this morning."

"By the way," said Glenbarth, "that reminds me that I was going to point out a curious thing to you concerning that man. Did you notice, Miss Trevor, that when we were alone together in the balcony he did not once touch his instrument, but directly Hatteras and Lady Hatteras arrived, he jumped up and began to play?"

This confirmed my suspicions. I had quite come to the conclusion by this time that the man had only made his appearance before the hotel in order to be certain of my address. Yet, I had to ask myself, if he were in Nikola's employ, why should he have been anxious to do so?

An hour later the ladies departed on their polite errand, and the Duke and I were left together. He was not what I should call a good companion. He was in an irritable mood, and nothing I could do or say seemed to comfort him. I knew very well what was the matter, and when we had exhausted English politics, the rise and fall of Venice, Ruskin, and the advantages of foreign travel, I mentioned incidentally the name of Miss Trevor. The frown vanished from his face, and he answered like a coherent mortal.

"Look here, Hatteras," he said, with a fine burst of confidence, "you and I have been friends for a good many years, and I think we know each other about as well as two men can do."

"That is so," I answered, wondering what he was driving at; "we have been through some strange adventures together, and should certainly know each other. I hope that you are not going to propose that we should depart on some harum-scarum expedition like that you wanted me to join you in last year, to the Pamirs, was it not? If so, I can tell you once and for all that my lady won't hear of it."

"Confound the Pamirs!" he replied angrily. "Is it likely that I should think of going there just now? You misunderstand my meaning entirely. What I want is a sympathetic friend, who can enter into my troubles, and if possible help me out of them."

For the life of me I could not forbear from teasing him for a little longer.

"My dear old fellow," I said, "you know that I will do anything I possibly can to help you. Take my advice and get rid of the man at once. As I told you in my letter to you before you left England, it is only misplaced kindness to keep him on. You know very well that he has been unfaithful to you for some years past. Then why allow him to continue in his wrong-doing? The smash will come sooner or later."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose your trouble is connected with the agent you were telling me of yesterday. The man who, it was discovered, had been cooking the accounts, selling your game, pocketing the proceeds, and generally feathering his own nest at your expense."

An ominous frown gathered upon my friend's forehead.

"Upon my word," he said, "I really believe you are taking leave of your senses. Do you think I am bothering myself at such a time about that wretched Mitchell? Let him sell every beast upon the farms, every head of game, and, in point of fact, let him swindle me as he likes, and I wouldn't give a second thought to him."

"I am very sorry," I answered penitently, rolling the leaf of my cigar. "Then it was the yacht you were thinking about? You have had what I consider a very good offer for her. Let her go! You are rich enough to be able to build another, and the work will amuse you. You want employment of some sort."

"I am not thinking of the yacht either," he growled. "You know that as well as I do."

"How should I know it?" I answered. "I am not able to tell what is in your mind. I do not happen to be like Nikola."

"You are singularly obtuse to-day," he asserted, throwing what remained of his cigar into the Canal and taking another from his case.

"Look here," I said, "you're pitching into me because I can't appreciate your position. Now how am I likely to be able to do so, considering that you've told me nothing about it? Before we left London you informed me that the place you had purchased in Warwickshire was going to prove your chief worry in life. I said, 'sell it again.' Then you found that your agent in Yorkshire was not what he might be. I advised you to get rid of him. You would not do so because of his family. Then you confessed in a most lugubrious fashion that your yacht was practically becoming unseaworthy by reason of her age. I suggested that you should sell her to Deeside, who likes her, or part with her for a junk. You vowed you would not do so because she was a favourite. Now you are unhappy, and I naturally suppose that it must be one of those things which is causing you uneasiness. You scout the idea. What, therefore, am I to believe? Upon my word, my friend, if I did not remember that you have always declared your abhorrence of the Sex, I should begin to think you must be in love."

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I pretended not to notice it, however, and still rolled the leaf of my cigar.

"Would it be such a very mad thing if I did fall in love?" he asked at last. "My father did so before me, and I believe my grandfather did also. You, yourself, committed the same indiscretion."

"And you have seen the miserable result?"

"I have observed one of the happiest couples in the world," he replied. "But, joking apart, Hatteras, I want to talk the matter over with you seriously. I don't mind telling you at once, as between friend and friend, that I want to marry Miss Trevor."

I endeavoured to look surprised, but I fear the attempt was a failure.

"May I remind you," I said, "that you have known her barely a week? I don't want to discourage you, but is not your affection of rather quick growth?"

"It is, but it does not mean that I am any the less sincere. I tell you candidly, Dick, I have never seen such a girl in my life. She would make any man happy."

"Very likely, but would any man make her happy?"

His face fell, and he shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Confound you," he said, "you put everything in a new light. Why should I not be able to make her happy? There are

lots of women who would give their lives to be a Duchess!"

"I admit that," I answered. "I don't fancy, however, your rank will make much difference with Miss Trevor. When a woman is a lady, and in love, she doesn't mind very much whether the object of her affections is a Duke or a chimney-sweep. Don't make the mistake of believing that a Dukedom counts for everything where the heart is concerned. We outsiders should have no chance at all if that were the case."

"But, Hatteras," he said, "I didn't mean that. I'm not such a cad as to imagine that Miss Trevor would marry me simply because I happen to have a handle to my name. I want to put the matter plainly before you. I have told you that I love her, do you think there is any chance of her taking a liking to me?"

"Now that you have told me what is in your mind," I answered, "I can safely state my opinion. Mind you, I know nothing about the young lady's ideas, but if I were a young woman, and an exceedingly presentable young man — you may thank me for the compliment afterwards — were to lay his heart at my feet, especially when that heart is served up on strawberry leaves and five-pound notes, I fancy I should be inclined to think twice before I discouraged his advances. Whether Miss Trevor will do so, however, is quite another matter."

"Then you are not able to give me any encouragement?"

"I will wish you God-speed upon your enterprise," I said, "if that is any satisfaction to you. I cannot do more."

As I said it I held out my hand, which he took and shook.

"God bless you, old man," he said, "you don't know what all this means to me. I've suffered agonies these last two days. I believe I should go mad if it continued. Yesterday she was kindness itself. To-day she will scarcely speak to me. I believe Lady Hatteras takes my side?"

I was not to be caught napping.

"You must remember that Lady Hatteras herself is an impressionable young woman," I answered. "She likes you and believes in you, and because she does she thinks her friend ought to do so also. Now look here, your Grace ——"

"You needn't put on any side of that kind," he answered reproachfully.

"I believe I am talking to the Duke of Glenbarth," I returned.

"You are talking to your old friend, the man who went round the world with you, if that's what you mean," he answered. "What is it you have to say?"

"I want you to plainly understand that Miss Trevor is my guest. I want you also to try to realize, however difficult it may be, that you have only known her a very short time. She is a particularly nice girl, as you yourself have admitted. It would be scarcely fair, therefore, if I were to permit you to give her the impression that you were in love with her until you have really made up your mind. Think it well over. Take another week, or shall we say a fortnight? A month would be better still."

He groaned in despair.

"You might as well say a year while you are about it. What is the use of my waiting even a week when I know my own mind already?"

"Because you must give your affection time to set. Take a week. If at the end of that time you are still as much in earnest as you are now, well, the matter will be worth thinking about. You can then speak to the young lady or not, as you please. On the other hand, should your opinion have changed, then I have been your only confidant, and no harm has been done. If she accepts you, I can honestly say that no one will be more delighted than myself. If not, you must look elsewhere, and then she must marry the man she likes better. Do you agree?"

"As I can't help myself I suppose I must," he answered. "But my position during the next week is not likely to be a very cheerful one."

"I don't at all see why," I replied. "Lots of others have been compelled to do their courting under harder auspices. Myself for instance. Here you are staying in the same house as the object of your affections. You meet her almost every hour of the day; you have innumerable opportunities of paying your court to her, and yet with all these advantages you abuse your lot."

"I know I am an ungrateful beast," he said. "But, by Jove, Dick, when one is as much in love as I am, and with the most adorable woman in the world, and matters don't seem to go right, one ought to be excused if one feels inclined to quarrel

with somebody.”

“Quarrel away with all your heart,” I answered. “And now I am going down with you to the hairdresser. After that we’ll go to the piazza.”

“I suppose I must,” he said, rising from his chair with a fine air of resignation. “Though what fun you can discover in that crowd I cannot for the life of me imagine.”

I did not remind him that on the previous afternoon he had declared it to be the most amusing sight in Europe. That would have been an unfair advantage to have taken, particularly as I had punished him enough already. We accordingly procured our hats and sticks, and having secured a gondola, set off. It was a lovely afternoon, and the Grand Canal was crowded. As we passed the entrance to the Rio del Consiglio, I stole a glance at the Palace Revecce. No gondola was at the door, so whether Nikola was at home or abroad I could not say. When Glenbarth had been operated upon we proceeded to the piazza of Saint Mark, which we reached somewhat before the usual afternoon promenade. The band had not commenced to play, and the idlers were few in number. Having engaged two chairs at one of the tables we sat down and ordered coffee. The duke was plainly ill at ease. He fretted and fidgeted continually. His eyes scarcely wandered from the steps of the lagoon, and every gondola that drew up received his scrutinizing attention. When at last two ladies disembarked and made their way across the stones towards Florian’s *café*, where we were seated, I thought he would have made an exhibition of himself.

Lady Beltringham, it would appear, had arrived, but was so fatigued by her long journey that she was unable to receive visitors.

“We returned almost immediately to the hotel,” said my wife reproachfully. “We thought you would have waited for us there.”

Glenbarth looked at me as if nothing I could ever do would make up for the enormity of my offence. He then described to Miss Trevor some wonderful photographs he had discovered that morning in a certain shop on the other side of the piazza. She questioned him concerning them, and I suggested that they should go off and overhaul them. This they did, and when they had departed my wife produced some letters for me she had taken from the rack at the hotel. I looked at the writing upon the envelope of the first, but for a moment could not recall where or when I had seen it before. Then I opened it and withdrew the contents.

“Why, it’s from George Anstruther,” I exclaimed when I had examined the signature. “He is in Algiers.”

“But what is the letter about?” my wife inquired. “You have not heard from him for so long.”

“I’ll read it,” I said, and began as follows —

“My dear Hatteras,

“Here I am in the most charming place on the whole Mediterranean, and I ought to know, for I’ve seen and loathed all the others. My villa overlooks the sea, and my yacht rides at anchor in the bay. There are many nice people here, and not the least pleasant is my very good friend, Don Josè de Martinos, who is leaving to-day for his first visit to Venice, via Nice, and I understand from him that he is to stay at your hotel. He is a delightful creature; has seen much of the world, and if you will admit him to the circle of your acquaintance, I don’t think you will regret it. I need not bore either myself or you by repeating the hackneyed phrase to the effect that any civility you show him will be considered a kindness to myself, etc., etc. Remember me most kindly to Lady Hatteras, and

“Believe me to be,

“Ever sincerely yours,

“George Anstruther.”

My wife uttered a little cry of vexation.

“Pleasant though he may prove, I cannot help saying that I am sorry Don Josè Martinos is coming,” she said. “Our little party of four was so happily arranged, and who knows but that a fifth may upset its peace altogether?”

“But he is Anstruther’s friend,” I said in expostulation. “One must be civil to one’s friends’ friends.”

“I do not at all see why,” she answered. “Because we like Mr. Anstruther it does not follow that we shall like his friend.”

At that moment the young couple were to be observed crossing the piazza in our direction. Glenbarth carried a parcel

under his arm.

“I don’t think there is much doubt about that affair,” said my wife, as she regarded them approvingly.

“Don’t be too sure,” I answered. “There is many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip, and there is another old saying to the effect that those who live longest see most.”

One is sometimes oracular even in jest.



CHAPTER 61

On the following day, having sent my servant to inquire, I was informed that the Don Josè de Martinos had arrived at the hotel, and had engaged rooms on the floor above our own. Accordingly, after luncheon I ascended to the rooms in question, and asked whether he would receive me. I had scarcely waited more than a minute before he made his appearance. He paused on the threshold to give an order to his man, and while he did so, I was permitted an opportunity of taking stock of him. He was a tall, muscular man of between thirty-five and forty years of age. His appearance did not betray so much of his Spanish origin as I had expected. Indeed, it would have been difficult to have given him a nationality. I noticed that his beard, which he wore closely clipped, was not innocent of the touch of Time. His face was a powerful one, but at first glance I was not altogether prepossessed in its favour. His hands and feet were small, the former particularly so for a man of his size and build. Moreover, he was faultlessly dressed, and carried himself with the air of a man of the world and of good breeding.

"Sir Richard Hatteras," he said, as he crossed the room to greet me, "this is kind of you indeed. My friend, Anstruther, informed me that you were in Venice, and was good enough to take upon himself the responsibility of introducing me to you."

His voice was strong and musical, and he pronounced every word (he spoke excellent English) as if it had a value of its own. I inquired after Anstruther's health, which for some time past had been precarious, and it was with satisfaction that I learnt of the improvement that had taken place in it.

"You would scarcely know him now," said Martinos. "He looks quite strong again. But permit me to offer you a cigar. We Spaniards say that we cannot talk unless we smoke; you English that you cannot smoke if you talk."

As he said this he handed me a box of cigars.

"I fancy you will like them," he said. "The tobacco was grown upon my own estate in Cuba; for that reason I can guarantee their purity."

The weed I selected was excellent, in fact one of the best cigars I had ever smoked. While he was lighting his I stole another glance at him. Decidedly he was a handsome man, but — here was the stumbling-block — there was something, I cannot say what, about him that I did not altogether like. It was not a crafty face, far from it. The eyes were well placed; the mouth from what one could see of it under his black moustache was well moulded, with white, even teeth; the nose was slightly aquiline; and the chin large, firm, and square. Nevertheless, there was something about it that did not suit my fancy. Once I told myself it was a cruel face, yet the singularly winning smile that followed a remark of mine a moment later went some way towards disabusing my mind upon that point.

"Lady Hatteras, I understood from Senor Anstruther, is with you," he said, after we had talked of other things.

"She is down-stairs at this moment," I answered. "We are a party of four — Miss Trevor (the daughter of the Dean of Bedminster), the Duke of Glenbarth, my wife, and myself. I hope you will permit me the pleasure of introducing you to them at an early date."

"I shall be most happy," he replied. "I am particularly fond of Venice, but, when all is said and done, one must have companions to enjoy it thoroughly."

I had been given to understand that this was his first visit to the Queen of the Adriatic, but I did not comment upon the fact.

"One is inclined to believe that Adam would have enjoyed the Garden of Eden if it had not been for Eve," I remarked, with a smile.

"Poor Adam," he answered, "I have always thought him a much-abused man. Unlike ourselves, he was without experience; he had a companion forced upon him who worked his ruin, and his loss on the transaction was not only physical but financial."

"How long do you contemplate remaining in Venice?" I asked, after the little pause that followed his last speech.

"I scarcely know," he answered. "My movements are most erratic. I am that most unfortunate of God's creatures, a wanderer on the face of the earth. I have no relations and few friends. I roam about as the fancy takes me, remain in a place

as long as it pleases me, and then, like the Arab in the poem, silently take up my tent and move on as soon as the city I happen to be in at the time has lost its charm. I possess a *pied-à-terre* of four rooms in Cairo, I have lived amongst the Khabyles in the desert, and with the Armenians in the mountains. To sum it up, I have the instincts of the Wandering Jew, and fortunately the means of gratifying them."

What it was I cannot say, but there was something in his speech that grated upon my feelings. Whether what he had said were true or not, I am not in a position to affirm, but the impression I received was that he was talking for effect, and every one will know what that means.

"As you are such a globe-trotter," I said, "I suppose there is scarcely a portion of the world that you have not visited?"

"I have perhaps had more than my share of travelling," he answered. "I think I can safely say that, with the exception of South America, I have visited every portion of the known globe."

"You have never been in South America then?" I asked in some surprise.

"Never," he replied, and immediately changed the conversation by inquiring whether I had met certain of Anstruther's friends who were supposed to be on their way to Venice. A few minutes later, after having given him an invitation to dinner on the next evening, I bade him good-bye and left him. On my return my wife was eager to question me concerning him, but as things stood I did not feel capable of giving her a detailed reply. There are some acquaintances who, one feels, will prove friends from the outset; there are others who fill one from the first with a vague distrust. Not that I altogether distrusted Martinos, I had not seen enough of him to do that; at the same time, however, I could not conscientiously say, as I have already observed, that I was altogether prepossessed in his favour.

The following morning he accepted my invitation for that evening, and punctually at half-past seven he made his appearance in the drawing-room. I introduced him to my wife, and also to Miss Trevor when she joined us.

"My husband tells me that you are a great traveller," said Phyllis, after they had seated themselves. "He says you know the world as we know London."

"Your husband does me too much honour," he answered modestly. "From what I have heard of you, you must know the world almost as well as I do. My friend, Anstruther, has told me a romantic story about you. Something connected with a South Sea island, and a mysterious personage named ——"

He paused for a moment as if to remember the name.

"Nikola," I said; "you do not happen to have met him, I suppose?"

"To my knowledge, never," he answered. "It is a strange surname."

At that moment Glenbarth entered the room, and I introduced the two men to each other. For some reason of my own I was quite prepared to find that the Duke would not take a fancy to our new acquaintance, nor was I destined to be disappointed. Before dinner was half over I could see that he had a great difficulty in being civil to the stranger. Had Martinos not been our guest, I doubt very much whether he would have been able to control himself. And yet the Spaniard laid himself out in every way to please. His attentions were paid chiefly to my wife, I do not believe that he addressed Miss Trevor more than a dozen times throughout the meal. Notwithstanding this fact, Glenbarth regarded him with evident animosity, insomuch that Miss Trevor more than once looked at him with an expression of positive alarm upon her face. She had not seen him in this humour before, and though she may have had her suspicions as to the reason of it, it was plain that she was far from approving of his line of action. When the ladies withdrew, and the wine was being circulated, I endeavoured to draw the two men into greater harmony with each other. The attempt, however, was unsuccessful. More than once Glenbarth said things which bordered on rudeness, until I began to feel angry with him. On one occasion, happening to look up suddenly from the cigar which I was cutting, I detected a look upon the Spaniard's face that startled me. It however showed me one thing, and that was the fact that despite his genial behaviour, Martinos had not been blind to the young man's treatment of himself, and also that, should a time ever arrive when he would have a chance of doing Glenbarth a mischief, he would not be forgetful of the debt he owed him. Matters were not much better when we adjourned to the drawing-room. Glenbarth, according to custom, seated himself beside Miss Trevor, and studiously ignored the Spaniard. I was more sorry for this than I could say. It was the behaviour of a school-boy, not that of a man of the world; and the worst part of it was, that it was doing Glenbarth no sort of good in the eyes of the person with whom he wished to stand best. The truth was the poor lad was far from being himself. He was suffering from an acute attack of a disease which has not yet received the proper attention of Science — the disease of first love. So overwhelmed was he by his passion, that

he could not bear any stranger even to look upon the object of his adoration. Later in the evening matters reached their climax, when my wife asked the Don to sing.

"I feel sure that you *do* sing," she said in that artless way which women often affect.

"I try sometimes to amuse my friends," said he, and begging us to excuse him he retired to his own rooms, to presently return with a large Spanish guitar. Having taken a seat near the window, and when he had swept his fingers over the strings in a few preliminary chords, he commenced to sing. He was the possessor of a rich baritone, which he used with excellent effect. My wife was delighted, and asked him to sing again. Miss Trevor also expressed her delight, and seconded my wife's proposal. This was altogether too much for Glenbarth. Muttering something about a severe headache he hurriedly left the room. My wife and I exchanged glances, but Martinos and Miss Trevor did not appear to notice his absence. This time he sang a Spanish fishing-song, but I did not pay much attention to it. A little later the Don, having thanked us for our hospitality, took his departure, and when Miss Trevor had said good-night to us, and had retired to her own room, my wife and I were left alone together.

"What could have made the Duke behave like that?" she said.

"He is madly in love, my dear, and also madly jealous," I answered. "I hope and trust, however, that he is not going to repeat this performance."

"If he does he will imperil any chance he has of winning Gertrude's love," she replied. "He will also place us in a decidedly awkward position."

"Let this be a lesson to you, my dear, never to play with fire again," I replied. "You bring two inflammable people

together, and wonder that there should be an explosion.”

“Well, I’m really very angry with him. I don’t know what the Don Josè must have thought.”

“Probably he thought nothing about it,” I replied. “You mustn’t be too angry with Glenbarth, however. Leave him to me, and I’ll talk to him. To-morrow, I promise you, he’ll be sorry for himself. If I know anything of women, Gertrude will make him wish he had acted differently.”

“I don’t think she will bother about the matter. She has too much sense.”

“Very well; we shall see.”

I then bade her go to bed, promising myself to sit up for Glenbarth, who, I discovered, had gone out. It was nearly midnight when he returned. I noticed that every trace of ill-humour had vanished from his face, and that he was quite himself once more.

“My dear Dick,” he said, “I don’t know how to apologize for my ridiculous and rude behaviour of to-night. I am more ashamed of myself than I can say. I behaved like a child.”

Because he happened to be in a repentant mood I was not going to let him off the chastising I felt that I ought to give him.

“A nice sort of young fellow you are, upon my word,” I said, putting down the paper I had been reading as I spoke. “I’ve a very good mind to tell you exactly what I think of you.”

“It would be only wasting your time,” he returned. “For you can’t think half as badly of me as I do of myself. I can’t imagine what made me do it.”

“Can’t you?” I said. “Well, I can, and as you are pretty certain to catch it in one particular quarter to-morrow, I fancy, on mature reflection, that I can afford to forgive you. The man had done you no harm; he not only did not interfere with you, but he was not trespassing upon your —”

“Don’t speak of him,” said the young fellow, flaring up at once. “If I think of him I shall get angry again. I can’t bear the look of the beggar.”

“Steady, my young friend, steady,” I returned. “You mustn’t call other people’s friends by that name.”

“He is not your friend,” said Glenbarth excitedly. “You’ve never seen him until to-night, and you’ve known me ever since I was about so high.”

“I began to imagine you only ‘so high’ this evening,” I said. “It’s a good thing for you that the wife has gone to bed, or I fancy you would have heard something that would have made your ears tingle. After the foolish manner of women, she has come to the conclusion that she would like you to marry Miss Trevor.”

“God bless her!” he said fervently. “I knew that she was my friend.”

“In that case you would probably have enjoyed a friend’s privilege, had you been here to-night before she retired, and have received a dressing-down that is usually reserved for her husband. I live in hopes that you may get it to-morrow.”

“Bosh!” he answered. “And now, if you have forgiven me, I think I will go to bed. I’ve had enough of myself for one day.”

With that we shook hands, and bade each other good-night. At his bedroom door he stopped me.

“Do you think she will forgive me?” he asked, as humbly as would a boy who had been caught stealing sugar-plums.

“My wife,” I answered. “Yes, I think it is very probable that she will.”

“No, no; how dense you are; I mean —” Here he nodded his head in the direction of the room occupied by Miss Trevor.

“You’ll have to find out that for yourself,” I replied, and then went on to my dressing-room.

“That will give your Grace something to think about all night,” I said, as I took off my coat.

As it turned out, I was destined to be fairly accurate in the prophecy I had made concerning Miss Trevor’s treatment of Glenbarth on the morrow. At breakfast she did not altogether ignore him, but when I say that she devoted the larger share of her attention to myself, those of my readers who are married, and have probably had the same experience, will understand. My wife, on the other hand, was affability itself, and from her behaviour toward him appeared to be quite willing to forgive and forget the unfortunate episode of the previous evening. I chuckled to myself, but said nothing. He

was not at the end of his punishment yet.

All that day we saw nothing of Martinos. Whether he remained at home or went abroad we could not say. On returning to the hotel to lunch, however, we discovered a basket of roses in the drawing-room, with the Don's card tied to the handle.

"Oh, what lovely flowers!" cried my wife in an ecstasy. "Look, Gertrude, are they not beautiful?"

Miss Trevor cordially admired them; and in order, I suppose, that Glenbarth's punishment might be the more complete, begged for a bud to wear herself. One was given her, while I watched Glenbarth's face over the top of the letter I was reading at the moment. My heart was touched by his miserable face, and when he and my wife had left the room to prepare for lunch, I determined to put in a good word for him.

"Miss Gertrude," I said, "as an old friend I have a favour to ask of you. Do you think you can grant it?"

"You must first tell me what it is," she said, with a smile upon her face. "I know from experience that you are not to be trusted."

"A nice sort of character for a family man," I protested. "Lady Hatteras has been telling tales, I can see."

"Your wife would never tell a tale of any one, particularly of you," she asserted. "But what would you ask of me?"

"Only a plea for human happiness," I said with mock gravity. "I have seen absolute despair written indelibly on a certain human countenance to-day, and the sight has troubled me ever since. Are you aware that there is a poor young man in this hotel, whose face opens like a daisy to the sun when you smile upon him, and closes in the darkness of your neglect?"

"How absurd you are!"

"Why am I absurd?"

"Because you talk in this fashion."

"Will you smile upon him again? He has suffered a great deal these last two days."

"Really you are too ridiculous. I don't know what you mean."

"That is not the truth, Miss Trevor, and you know it."

"But what have I done wrong?"

"That business with the rose just now, for instance, was cruel, to say the least of it."

"Really, Sir Richard, you *do* say such foolish things. If I want a rose to wear surely I may have one. But I must not stay talking to you, it's five-and-twenty minutes past one. I must go and get ready for lunch."

I held open the door for her, and as she passed I said —

"You will do what I ask? Just to please me?"

"I don't know what you mean, but I will think it over," she replied, and then departed to her room.

She must have done as she promised, for the rose was absent from her dress when she sat down to lunch. Glenbarth noticed it, and from that moment his drooping spirits revived.

That afternoon my wife and I went down to meet the P. and O. mail-boat, in order to discover some friends who were on their way to Egypt. As neither the Duke of Glenbarth nor Miss Trevor were acquainted with them they were excused from attendance. When we joined them it was plain that all traces of trouble had been removed, and in consequence the Duke was basking in the seventh heaven of happiness. Had I asked the young man at that moment for half his estates I believe he would willingly have given them to me. He would have done so even more willingly had he known that it was to my agency that he owed the wondrous change in his affairs. For some reason of her own Miss Trevor was also in the best of spirits. My wife was happy because her turtle-doves were happy, and I beamed upon them all with the complacency of the God out of the machine.

All this time I had been wondering as to the reason why we had not heard or seen anything of Nikola. Why I should have expected to do so I cannot say, but after the events of three evenings ago, I had entertained a vague hope that I should have seen him, or that he would have communicated with me in some form or another. We were to see him, however, before very long.

We had arranged to visit the Academy on our return from the mail-boat, where my wife was anxious to renew her acquaintance with the Titans. For my own part I am prepared to admit that my knowledge of the pictures is not sufficiently

cultivated to enable me to derive any pleasure from the constant perusal of these Masters. Phyllis and Miss Trevor, however, managed to discover a source of considerable satisfaction in them. When we left the gallery, we made our way, according to custom, in the direction of the piazza of Saint Mark. We had not advanced very far upon our walk, however, before I chanced to turn round, to discover, striding after us, no less a person than our new acquaintance, Don José Martinos. He bowed to the ladies, shook hands with myself, and nodded to the Duke.

"If you are proceeding in the direction of the piazza, will you permit me to accompany you?" he asked, and that permission having been given by my wife, we continued our walk. What Glenbarth thought of it I do not know, but as he had Miss Trevor to himself, I do not see that he had anything to complain of. On reaching Florian's *café*, we took our customary seats, the Don placing himself next to my wife, and laying himself out to be agreeable. Once he addressed Glenbarth, and I was astonished to see the conciliatory manner that the other adopted towards him.

"Now that he sees that he has nothing to fear, perhaps he will not be so jealous," I said to myself, and indeed it appeared as if this were likely to be the case. I was more relieved by this discovery than I could say. As we should probably be some time in Venice, and the Don had arrived with the same intention, and we were to be located in the same hotel, it was of the utmost importance to our mutual comforts that there should be no friction between the two men. But enough of this subject for the present. There are other matters to be considered. In the first place I must put on record a curious circumstance. In the light of after events it bears a strange significance, and he would be a courageous man who would dare to say that he could explain it.

It must be borne in mind, in order that the importance of what I am now about to describe may be plainly understood, that Miss Trevor was seated facing me, that is to say, with her back towards the Cathedral of St. Mark. She was in the best of spirits, and at the moment was engaged in an animated discussion with my wife on the effect of Ancient Art upon her *bête noir*, the Cockney tourist. Suddenly, without any apparent reason, her face grew deathly pale, and she came to a sudden stop in the middle of a sentence. Fortunately no one noticed it but my wife and myself, and as she was herself again in a moment, we neither of us called attention to it. A moment later I glanced across the square, and to my amazement saw no less a person than Doctor Nikola approaching us. Was it possible that Miss Trevor, in some extraordinary manner, had become aware of his proximity to her, or was it only one of those strange coincidences that are so difficult to explain away? I did not know what to think then, nor, as a matter of fact, do I now.

Reaching our party, Nikola raised his hat to the ladies.

"I fear, Lady Hatteras," he said, "that I must have incurred your displeasure for keeping your husband so long away from you the other night. If so, I hope you will forgive me."

"I will endeavour to do so," said my wife with a smile, "but you must be very careful how you offend again."

Then turning to Miss Trevor, he said, "I hope you will grant me your gracious intercession, Miss Trevor?"

"I will do my best for you," she answered, with a seriousness that made my wife and I look at her.

Then Nikola shook hands with Glenbarth, and glanced at the Don.

"Permit me to introduce you to Don José de Martinos, Doctor Nikola," I said; "he has lately arrived from Algiers."

The two men bowed gravely to each other.

"You are fond of travelling, I presume, Senor," said Nikola, fixing his eyes upon the Don.

"I have seen a considerable portion of the world," the other answered. "I have seen the Midnight Sun at Cape North and the drift ice off the Horn."

"And have not found it all barren," Nikola remarked gravely.

From that moment the conversation flowed smoothly. Miss Trevor had quite recovered herself, and I could see that the Don was intensely interested in Nikola. And indeed on this particular occasion the latter exerted himself to the utmost to please. I will admit, however, that something not unlike a shudder passed over me as I contrasted his present affability with his manner when he had threatened the unfortunate Police Agent a few nights before. Now he was a suave, pleasant-mannered man of the world, then he figured almost as an avenging angel; now he discussed modern literature, then I had heard him threaten a human being with the direst penalties that it was possible for man to inflict. When it was time for us to return to our hotel, Nikola rose and bade us good-bye.

"I hope you will permit me the pleasure of seeing more of you while you are in Venice," said Nikola, addressing the

Don. "If you are an admirer of the old palaces of this wonderful city, and our friends will accompany you, I shall be delighted to show you my own poor abode. It possesses points of interest that many of the other palaces lack, and, though it has fallen somewhat to decay, I fancy you will admit that the fact does not altogether detract from its interest."

"I shall hasten to avail myself of the opportunity you are kind enough to offer me," the other replied, after which they bowed ceremoniously to each other and parted.

"Your friend is an extraordinary man," said the Don as we walked towards the steps. "I have never met a more interesting person. Does he altogether reside in Venice?"

"Oh dear, no," I replied. "If one were asked to say where Nikola had his abode it would be almost necessary to say 'in the world.' I myself met him first in London, afterwards in Egypt, then in Australia, and later on in the South Sea Islands. Now we are together again in Venice. I have good reason for knowing that he is also familiar with China and Thibet. He himself confesses to a knowledge of Africa and Central America."

"To Central America?" said the Don quickly. "Pray what part of Central America does he know?"

"That I am unable to say," I replied. "I have never questioned him upon the subject."

From that moment the Don almost exclusively addressed himself to my wife, and did not refer to Nikola again. We parted in the hall of the hotel. Next morning we saw him for a few moments at the post-office, but at no other time during the day. On the following day he accompanied us on an excursion to Chioggia, and dined with us afterwards. Though I knew that Glenbarth still disliked him, his hostility was so veiled as to be scarcely noticeable. Towards the end of the evening a note was brought to me. One glance at the handwriting upon the envelope was sufficient to show me that it was from Nikola. It ran as follows —

"My dear Hatteras,

"Remembering your friend Don Martinos' desire to see my poor palace, I have written to ask him if he will dine with me to-morrow evening at eight o'clock. If I can persuade you and the Duke of Glenbarth to give me the pleasure of your society, I need scarcely say that you will be adding to my delight.

"Sincerely yours,

"Nikola."

"You have not of course received your letter yet," I said, addressing the Don. "What do you say to the invitation?"

"I shall accept it only too willingly," he answered without delay. "Provided, of course, you will go too."

"Have you any objection to raise, Duke?" I asked, addressing Glenbarth.

I could see that he was not very anxious to go, but under the circumstances he could not very well refuse.

"I shall be very happy," he answered.

And for once in his life he deliberately said what he knew to be untrue.



CHAPTER 62

“You surely are not going to dine with Doctor Nikola in that strange house?” said my wife, when we were alone together that night. “After what the Duke has told us, I wonder that you can be so foolish.”

“My dear girl,” I answered, “I don’t see the force of your argument. I shan’t be the first who has eaten a meal in the house in question, and I don’t suppose I shall be the last. What do you think will happen to me? Do you think that we have returned to the times of the Borgias, and that Nikola will poison us? No, I am looking forward to a very enjoyable and instructive evening.”

“While we are sitting at home, wondering if the table is disappearing bodily into the vaults and taking you with it, or whether Nikola is charging the side-dishes with some of his abominable chemistry, by which you will be put to sleep for three months, or otherwise experimenting upon you in the interests of what he calls Science. I don’t think it is at all kind of you to go.”

“Dear girl,” I answered, “are you not a little unreasonable? Knowing that de Martinos has but lately arrived in Venice, also that he is a friend of ours — for did he not meet him when in our company? — it is only natural that Nikola should desire to show him some courtesy. In spite of its decay, the Palace Revecce is an exceedingly beautiful building, and when he heard that Martinos would like to visit it, he invited him to dinner. What could be more natural? This is the nineteenth century!”

“I am sure I don’t mind what century it is,” she replied. “Still I adhere to what I said just now. I am sorry you are going.”

“In that case I am sorry also,” I answered, “but as the matter stands I fail to see how I can get out of it. I could not let the Duke and Martinos go alone, so what can I do?”

“I suppose you will have to go,” she replied ruefully. “I have a presentiment, however, that trouble will result from it.”

With that the subject was dropped, and it was not until the following morning, when I was smoking with Glenbarth after breakfast, that it cropped up again.

“Look here, Dick,” said my companion then. “What about this dinner at Nikola’s house to-night? You seemed to be very keen on going last night; are you of the same mind this morning?”

“Why not?” I answered. “My wife does not like the notion, but I am looking forward to seeing Nikola play the host. The last time I dined with him, you must remember, was in Port Said, and then the banquet could scarcely be described as a pleasant one. What is more, I am anxious to see what effect Nikola and his house will produce upon our friend the Don.”

“I wish he’d get rid of him altogether,” my companion replied. “I dislike the fellow more and more every time I see him.”

“Why should you? He does you no harm!”

“It’s not that,” said Glenbarth. “My dislike to him is instinctive; just as one shudders when one looks into the face of a snake, or as one is repelled by a toad or a rat. In spite of his present apparent respectability, I should not be at all surprised to hear that at some period of his career he had committed murders innumerable.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” I replied, “you must not imagine such things as that. You were jealous when you first saw him, because you thought he was going to come between you and Miss Trevor. You have never been able to overcome the feeling, and this continued dislike is the result. You must fight against it. Doubtless, when you have seen more of him, you will like him better.”

“I shall never like him better than I do now,” he answered, with conviction. “As they say in the plays, ‘my gorge rises at him!’ If you saw him in the light I do, you would not let Lady Hatteras —”

“My dear fellow,” I began, rising from my chair and interrupting him, “this is theatrical and very ridiculous, and I assume the right of an old friend to tell you so. If you prefer not to go to-night, I’ll make some excuse for you, but don’t, for goodness’ sake, go and make things unpleasant for us all while you’re there.”

“I have no desire to do so,” he replied stiffly. “What is more, I am not going to let you go alone. Write your letter and accept for us both. Bother Nikola and Martinos as well, I wish they were both on the other side of the world.”

I thereupon wrote a note to Nikola accepting, on Glenbarth's behalf and my own, his invitation to dinner for that evening. Then I dismissed the matter from my mind for the time being. An hour or so later my wife came to me with a serious face.

"I am afraid, Dick, that there is something the matter with Gertrude," she said. "She has gone to her room to lie down, complaining of a very bad headache and a numbness in all her limbs. I have done what I can for her, but if she does not get better by lunch-time, I think I shall send for a doctor."

As, by lunch-time, she was no better, the services of an English doctor were called in. His report to my wife was certainly a puzzling one. He declared he could discover nothing the matter with the girl, nor anything to account for the mysterious symptoms.

"Is she usually of an excitable disposition?" he inquired, when we discussed the matter together in the drawing-room.

"Not in the least," I replied. "I should say she is what might be called a very evenly-dispositioned woman."

He asked one or two other questions and then took leave of us, promising to call again next day.

"I cannot understand it at all," said my wife when he had gone; "Gertrude seemed so well last night. Now she lies upon her bed and complains of this continued pain in her head and the numbness in all her limbs. Her hands and feet are as cold as ice, and her face is as white as a sheet of note-paper."

During the afternoon Miss Trevor determined to get up, only to be compelled to return to bed again. Her headache had left her, but the strange numbness still remained. She seemed incapable, so my wife informed me, of using her limbs. The effect upon the Duke may be better imagined than described. His face was the picture of desolation, and his anxiety was all the greater inasmuch as he was precluded from giving vent to it in speech. I am afraid that, at this period of his life, the young gentleman's temper was by no means as placid as we were accustomed to consider it. He was given to flaring up without the slightest warning, and to looking upon himself and his own little world in a light that was very far removed from cheerful. Realizing that we could do no good at home, I took him out in the afternoon, and was given to understand that I was quite without heart, because, when we had been an hour abroad, I refused to return to the hotel.

"I wonder if there is anything that Miss Trevor would like," he said, as we crossed the piazza of Saint Mark. "It could be sent up to her, you know, in your name."

"You might send her some flowers," I answered. "You could then send them from yourself."

"By Jove, that's the very thing. You do have some good ideas sometimes."

"Thank you," I said quietly. "Approbation from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed."

"Bother your silly quotations!" he retorted. "Let's get back to that flower-shop."

We did so, and thereupon that reckless youth spent upon flowers what would have kept me in cigars for a month. Having paid for them and given orders that they should be sent to the Hotel Galaghetti at once, we left the shop. When we stood outside, I had to answer all sorts of questions as to whether I thought she would like them, whether it would not have been better to have chosen more of one sort than another, and whether the scent would not be too strong for a sick-room. After that he felt doubtful whether the shopkeeper would send them in time, and felt half inclined to return in order to impress this fact upon the man. Let it be counted to me for righteousness that I bore with him patiently, remembering my own feeling at a similar stage in my career. When we reached the hotel on our return, we discovered that the patient was somewhat better. She had had a short sleep, and it had refreshed her. My wife was going to sit with her during the evening, and knowing this, I felt that we might go out with clear consciences.

At a quarter to seven we retired to our rooms to dress, and at a quarter past the hour were ready to start. When we reached the hall, we found the Don awaiting us there. He was dressed with the greatest care, and presented a not unhandsome figure. He shook hands cordially with me and bowed to Glenbarth, who had made no sign of offering him his hand. Previous to setting out, I had extorted from that young man his promise that he would behave with courtesy towards the other during the evening.

"You can't expect me to treat the fellow as a friend," he had said in reply, "but I will give you my word that I'll be civil to him — if that's what you want."

And with this assurance I was perforce compelled to be content.

Having taken our places in the gondola which was waiting for us, we set off.

"I had the pleasure of seeing Doctor Nikola this morning," said Martinos, as we turned into the Rio del Consiglio. "He did me the honour of calling upon me."

I gave a start of surprise on hearing this.

"Indeed," I replied. "And at what hour was that?"

"Exactly at eleven o'clock," the Don answered. "I remember the time because I was in the act of going out, and we encountered each other in the hall."

Now it is a singular thing, a coincidence if you like, but it was almost on the stroke of eleven that Miss Trevor had been seized with her mysterious illness. At a quarter past the hour she felt so poorly as to be compelled to retire to her room. Of course there could be no connection between the two affairs, but it was certainly a coincidence of a nature calculated to afford me ample food for reflection. A few moments later the gondola drew up at the steps of the Palace Revecce. Almost at the same instant the door opened and we entered the house. The courtyard had been lighted in preparation for our coming, and, following the man who had admitted us, we ascended the stone staircase to the corridor above. Though not so dismal as when I had last seen it, lighted only by Nikola's lantern, it was still sufficiently awesome to create a decided impression upon the Don.

"You were certainly not wrong when you described it as a lonely building," he said, as we passed along the corridor to Nikola's room.

As he said this the door opened, and Nikola stood before us. He shook hands with the Duke first, afterwards with the Don, and then with myself.

"Let me offer you a hearty welcome," he began. "Pray enter."

We followed him into the room I have already described, and the door was closed behind us. It was in this apartment that I had expected we should dine, but I discovered that this was not to be the case. The tables were still littered with papers, books, and scientific apparatus, just as when I had last seen it. Glenbarth seated himself in a chair by the window, but I noticed that his eyes wandered continually to the oriental rug upon the floor by the fireplace. He was doubtless thinking of the vaults below, and, as I could easily imagine, wishing himself anywhere else than where he was. The black cat, Apollyon, which was curled up in an arm-chair, regarded us for a few seconds with attentive eyes, as if to make sure of our identities, and then returned to his slumbers. The windows were open, I remember, and the moon was just rising above the house-tops opposite. I had just gone to the casement, and was looking down upon the still waters below, when the tapestry of the wall on the right hand was drawn aside by the man who had admitted us to the house, who informed Nikola in Italian that dinner was upon the table.

"In that case let us go in to it," said our host. "Perhaps your Grace will be kind enough to lead the way."

Glenbarth did as he was requested, and we followed him, to find ourselves in a large, handsome apartment, which had once been richly frescoed, but was now, like the rest of the palace, sadly fallen to decay. In the centre of the room was a small oval table, well illuminated by a silver lamp, which diffused a soft light upon the board, the remainder of the room being in heavy shadow. The decorations, the napery, and the glass and silver, were, as I could see at one glance, unique. Three men-servants awaited our coming, though where they hailed from and how Nikola had induced them to enter the palace, I could not understand. Nikola, as our host, occupied one end of the table; Glenbarth, being the principal guest of the evening, was given the chair on his left; the Don took that on the right, while I faced him at the further end. How, or by whom, the dinner was cooked was another mystery. Nikola had told us on the occasion of our first visit, that he possessed no servants, and that such cooking as he required was done for him by an old man who came in once every day. Yet the dinner he gave us on this particular occasion was worthy of the finest *chef* in Europe. It was perfect in every particular. Though Nikola scarcely touched anything, he did the honours of his table royally, and with a grace that was quite in keeping with the situation. Had my wife and Miss Trevor been present, they might, for all the terrors they had anticipated for us, very well have imagined themselves in the dining-room of some old English country mansion, waited upon by the family butler, and taken in to dinner by the Bishop and Rural Dean. The Nikola I had seen when I had last visited the house was as distant from our present host as if he had never existed. When I looked at him, I could scarcely believe that he had ever been anything else but the most delightful man of my acquaintance.

"As a great traveller, Don Josè," he said, addressing the guest on his right hand, "you have of course dined in a great number of countries, and I expect under a variety of startling circumstances. Now tell me, what is your most pleasant

recollection of a meal?"

"That which I managed to obtain after the fall of Valparaiso," said Martinos. "We had been without food for two days, that is to say, without a decent meal, when I chanced upon a house where breakfast had been abandoned without being touched. I can see it now. Ye gods! it was delightful. And not the less so because the old rascal we were after had managed to make his escape."

"You were in opposition to Balmaceda, then?" said Nikola quietly.

Martinot paused for a moment before he answered.

"Yes, against Balmaceda," he replied. "I wonder whether the old villain really died, and if so what became of his money."

"That is a question one would like to have settled concerning a good many people," Glenbarth put in.

"There was that man up in the Central States, the Republic of — ah! what was its name? — Equinata," said Nikola. "I don't know whether you remember the story."

"Do you mean the fellow who shot those unfortunate young men?" I asked. "The man you were telling me of the other night."

"The same," Nikola replied. "Well, he managed to fly his country, taking with him something like two million dollars. From that moment he has never been heard of, and as a matter of fact I do not suppose he ever will be. After all, luck has a great deal to do with things in this world."

"Permit me to pour out a libation to the God of Chance," said Martinos. "He has served me well."

"I think we can all subscribe to that," said Nikola. "You, Sir Richard, would not be the happy man you are had it not been for a stroke of good fortune which shipwrecked you on one island in the Pacific instead of another. You, my dear Duke, would certainly have been drowned in Bournemouth Bay had not our friend Hatteras chanced to be an early riser, and to have taken a certain cruise before breakfast; while you, Don Martinos, would in all probability not be my guest to-night had not —"

The Spaniard looked sharply at him as if he feared what he was about to hear.

"Had not what happened?" he asked.

"Had President Balmaceda won his day," was the quiet reply. "He did not do so, however, and so we four sit here to-night. Certainly, a libation to the God of Chance."

At last the dinner came to an end, and the servants withdrew, having placed the wine upon the table. The conversation drifted from one subject to another until it reached the history of the palace in which we were then the guests. For the Spaniard's information Nikola related it in detail. He did not lay any particular emphasis upon it, however, as he had done upon the story he had told the Duke and myself concerning the room in which he had received us. He merely narrated it in a matter-of-fact way, as if it were one in which he was only remotely interested. Yet I could not help thinking that he fixed his eyes more keenly than usual on the Spaniard, who sat sipping his wine and listening with an expression of polite attention upon his sallow face. When the wine had been circulated for the last time, Nikola suggested that we should leave the dining-room and return to his own sitting-room.

"I do not feel at home in this room," he said by way of explanation; "for that reason I never use it. I usually partake of such food as I need in the next, and allow the rest of the house to fall undisturbed into that decay which you see about you."

With that we rose from the table and returned to the room in which he had received us. A box of cigars was produced and handed round; Nikola made coffee with his own hands at a table in the corner, and then I awaited the further developments that I knew would come. Presently Nikola began to speak of the history of Venice. As I had already had good reason to know, he had made a perfect study of it, particularly of the part played in it by the Revecce family. He dealt with particular emphasis upon the betrayal through the Lion's Mouth, and then, with an apology to Glenbarth and myself for boring us with it again, referred to the tragedy of the vaults below the room in which we were then seated. Once more he drew back the carpet and the murderous trap-door opened. A cold draught, suggestive of unspeakable horrors, came up to us.

"And there the starving wretch died with the moans of the woman he loved sounding in his ears from the room above," said Nikola. "Does it not seem that you can hear them now? For my part, I think they will echo through all eternity."

If he had been an actor what a wonderful tragedian he would have made! As he stood before us pointing down into the abyss he held us spell-bound. As for Martinos, all the accumulated superstition of the centuries seemed to be concentrated in him, and he watched Nikola's face as if he were fascinated beyond the power of movement.

"Come," Nikola began at last, closing the trap-door and placing the rug upon it as he spoke, "you have heard the history of the house. You shall now do more than that! You shall see it!"

Fixing his eyes upon us he made two or three passes in the air with his long white hands. Meanwhile, it seemed to me as if he were looking into my brain. I tried to avert my eyes, but without success. They were chained to his face, and I could not remove them. Then an overwhelming feeling of drowsiness took possession of me, and I must have lost consciousness, for I have no recollection of anything until I found myself in a place I thought for a moment I had never seen before. And yet after a time I recognized it. It was a bright day in the early spring, the fresh breeze coming over the islands from the open sea was rippling the water of the lagoons. I looked at my surroundings. I was in Venice, and yet it was not the Venice with which I was familiar. I was standing with Nikola upon the steps of a house, the building of which was well-nigh completed. It was a magnificent edifice, and I could easily understand the pride of the owner as he stood in his gondola and surveyed it from the stretch of open water opposite. He was a tall and handsome man, and wore a doublet and hose, shoes with large bows, and a cloak trimmed with fur. There was also a chain of gold suspended round his neck. Beside him was a man whom I rightly guessed to be the architect, for presently the taller man placed his hand upon his shoulder and praised him for the work he had done, vowing that it was admirable. Then, at a signal, the gondolier gave a stroke of his oar and the little vessel shot across to the steps, where they landed close to where I was standing. I stepped back in order that they might pass, but they took no sort of notice of my presence. Passing on, they entered the house.

"They do not see us," said Nikola, who was beside me. "Let us enter and hear what the famous Admiral Francesco del Revecce thinks of his property."

We accordingly did so to find ourselves in a magnificent courtyard. In the centre of this courtyard was a well, upon which a carver in stone was putting the finishing touches to a design of leaves and fruit. From here led a staircase, and this we ascended. In the different rooms artists were to be observed at work upon the walls, depicting sea-fights, episodes in the history of the Republic, and of the famous master of the house. Before each the owner paused, bestowing approval, giving advice, or suggesting such alteration or improvement as he considered needful. In his company we visited the kitchens, the pantler's offices, and penetrated even to the dungeons below the water-level. Then we once more ascended to the courtyard, and stood at the great doors while the owner took his departure in his barge, pleased beyond measure with his new abode. Then the scene changed.

Once more I stood before the house with Nikola. It was night, but it was not dark, for great cressets flared on either side of the door, and a hundred torches helped to illuminate the scene. All the Great World of Venice was making its way to the Palace Revecce that night. The first of the series of gorgeous *fêtes* given to celebrate the nuptials of Francesco del Revecce, the most famous sailor of the Republic, who had twice defeated the French fleet, and who had that day married the daughter of the Duke of Levano, was in progress. The bridegroom was still comparatively young, he was also rich and powerful; the bride was one of the greatest heiresses of Venice, besides being one of its fairest daughters. Their new home was as beautiful as money and the taste of the period could make it. Small wonder was it, therefore, that the world hastened to pay court to them.

"Let us once more enter and look about us," said Nikola.

"One moment," I answered, drawing him back a step as he was in the act of coming into collision with a beautiful girl who had just disembarked from her gondola upon the arm of a grey-haired man.

"You need have no fear," he replied. "You forget that we are Spirits in a Spirit World, and that they are not conscious of our presence."

And indeed this appeared to be the case, for no one recognized us, and more than once I saw people approach Nikola, and, scarcely believable though it may seem, walk through him without being the least aware of the fact.

On this occasion the great courtyard was brilliantly illuminated. Scores of beautiful figures were ascending the stairs continually, while strains of music sounded from the rooms above.

"Let us ascend," said Nikola, "and see the pageant there."

It was indeed a sumptuous entertainment, and when we entered the great reception-rooms, no fairer scene could have

been witnessed in Venice. I looked upon the bridegroom and his bride, and recognized the former as being the man I had seen praising the architect on the skill he had displayed in the building of the palace. He was more bravely attired now, however, than on that occasion, and did the honours of his house with the ease and assurance of one accustomed to uphold the dignity of his name and position in the world. His bride was a beautiful girl, with a pale, sweet face, and eyes that haunted one long after they had looked at them. She was doing her best to appear happy before her guests, but in my own heart I knew that such was not the case. Knowing what was before her, I realized something of the misery that was weighing so heavily upon her heart. Surrounding her were the proudest citizens of the proudest Republic of all time. There was not one who did not do her honour, and among the women who were her guests that night, how many were there who envied her good fortune? Then the scene once more changed.

This time the room was that with which I was best acquainted, the same in which Nikola had taken up his abode. The frescoes upon the walls and ceilings were barely dry, and Revecce was at sea again, opposing his old enemy the French, who once more threatened an attack upon the city. It was towards evening, and the red glow of the sunset shone upon a woman's face, as she stood beside the table at which a man was writing. I at once recognized her as Revecce's bride. The man himself was young and handsome, and when he looked up at the woman and smiled, the love-light shone in her eyes, as it had not done when she had looked upon Revecce. There was no need for Nikola to tell me that he was Andrea Bunopelli, the artist to whose skill the room owed its paintings.

"Art thou sure 'twill be safe, love?" asked the woman in a low voice, as she placed her hand upon his shoulder. "Remember 'tis death to bring a false accusation against a citizen of the Republic, and 'twill be worse when 'tis against the great Revecce."

"I have borne that in mind," the man answered. "But there is nought to fear, dear love. The writing will not be suspected, and I will drop it in the Lion's Mouth myself — and then?"

Her only answer was to bend over him and kiss him. He scattered the sand upon the letter he had written, and when it was dry, folded it up and placed it in his bosom. Then he kissed the woman once more and prepared to leave the room. The whole scene was so real that I could have sworn that he saw me as I stood watching him.

"Do not linger," she said in farewell. "I shall know no peace till you return."

Drawing aside the curtain he disappeared, and then once more the scene changed.

A cold wind blew across the lagoon, and there was a suspicion of coming thunder in the air. A haggard, ragged tatterdemalion was standing on the steps of a small door of the palace. Presently it was opened to him by an ancient servant, who asked his business, and would have driven him away. When he had whispered something to him, however, the other realized that it was his master, whom he thought to be a prisoner in the hands of the French. Then, amazed beyond measure, the man admitted him. Having before me the discovery he was about to make, I looked at him with pity, and when he stumbled and almost fell, I hastened forward to pick him up, but only clasped air. At last, when his servant had told him everything, he followed him to a distant portion of the palace, where he was destined to remain hidden for some days, taking advantage of the many secret passages the palace contained, and by so doing confirming his suspicions. His wife was unfaithful to him, and the man who had wrought his dishonour was the man to whom he had been so kind and generous a benefactor. I seemed to crouch by his side time after time in the narrow passage behind the arras, watching through a secret opening the love-making going on within. I could see the figure beside me quiver with rage and hate, until I thought he would burst in upon them, and then the old servant would lead him away, his finger upon his lips. How many times I stood with him there I cannot say, it is sufficient that at last he could bear the pain no longer, and, throwing open the secret door, entered the room and confronted the man and woman. As I write, I can recall the trembling figures of the guilty pair, and the woman's shriek rings in my ears even now. I can see Bunopelli rising from the table, at which he had been seated, with the death-look in his face. Within an hour the confession of the crime they had perpetrated against Revecce had been written and signed, and they were separated and made secure until the time for punishment should arrive. Then, for the first time since he had arrived in Venice, he ordered his barge and set off for the Council Chamber to look his accusers in the face and to demand the right to punish those who had betrayed him.

When he returned his face was grim and set, and there was a look in his eyes that had not been there before. He ascended to the room in which there was the trap-door in the floor, and presently the wretched couple were brought before him. In vain Bunopelli pleaded for mercy for the woman. There was no mercy to be obtained there. I would have pleaded for them too, but I was powerless to make myself heard. I saw the great beads of perspiration that stood upon the man's brow, the look of agonizing entreaty in the woman's face, and the relentless decision on her husband's countenance. Nothing could save them now. The man was torn, crying to the last for mercy for her, from the woman's side, the trap-door gave a click, and he disappeared. Then they laid hands upon the woman, and I saw them force open her mouth — but I cannot set down the rest. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and though I rushed forward in the hope of preventing their horrible task, my efforts were as useless as before. Then, with the pitiless smile still upon the husband's face, and the moans ascending from the vault below, and the woman with. . . . The scene changed.

When I saw it again a stream of bright sunshine was flooding the room. It was still the same apartment, and yet in a sense not the same. The frescoes were faded upon the walls, there was a vast difference in the shape and make of the furniture, and in certain other things, but it was nevertheless the room in which Francesco del Revecce had taken his terrible revenge. A tall and beautiful woman, some thirty years of age, was standing beside the window holding a letter in her hand. She had finished the perusal of it and was lingering with it in her hand, looking lovingly upon the signature. At last she raised it to her lips and kissed it passionately. Then, crossing to a cradle at the further end of the room, she knelt beside it and looked down at the child it contained. She had bent her head in prayer, and was still praying, when with a start I awoke to find myself sitting beside Glenbarth and the Don in the room in which we had been smoking after dinner. Nikola was standing before the fireplace, and there was a look like that of death upon his face. It was not until afterwards

that the Spaniard and Glenbarth informed me that they had witnessed exactly what I had seen. Both, however, were at a loss to understand the meaning of the last picture, and, having my own thoughts in my mind, I was not to be tempted into explaining it to them. That it was Nikola's own mother, and that this house was her property, and the same in which the infamous governor of the Spanish Colony had made his love known to her, I could now see. And if anything were wanting to confirm my suspicions, Nikola's face, when my senses returned to me, was sufficient to do so.

"Let me get out of this house," cried the Duke thickly. "I cannot breathe while I am in it. Take me away, Hatteras; for God's sake take me away!"

I had already risen to my feet and had hastened to his side.

"I think it would be better that we should be going, Doctor Nikola," I said, turning to our host.

The Spaniard, on his side, did not utter a word. He was so dazed as to be beyond the power of speech. But Nikola did not seem to comprehend what I said. Never before had I seen such a look upon his face. His complexion was always white, now, however, it was scarcely human. For my own part I knew what was passing in his mind, but I could give no utterance to it.

"Come," I said to my companions, "let us return to our hotel."

They rose and began to move mechanically towards the door. The Duke had scarcely reached it, however, before Nikola, with what I could see was a violent effort, recovered his self-possession.

"You must forgive me," he said in almost his usual voice. "I had for the moment forgotten my duties as host. I fear you have had but a poor evening."

When we had donned our hats and cloaks, we accompanied him down-stairs through the house, which was now as silent as the grave, to the great doors upon the steps. Having hailed a gondola we entered it, after wishing Nikola "good-night." He shook hands with Glenbarth and myself, but I noticed that he did not offer to do so with the Don. Then we shot out into the middle of the canal and had presently turned the corner and were making our way towards our hotel. I am perfectly certain that during the journey not one of us spoke. The events of the evening had proved too much for us, and conversation was impossible. We bade Martinos "good-night" in the hall, and then the Duke and I ascended to our own apartments. Spirits had been placed upon the table, and I noticed that the Duke helped himself to almost twice his usual quantity. He looked as if he needed it.

"My God, Dick," he said, "did you see what happened in that room? Did you see that woman kneeling with the —"

He put down his glass hurriedly and walked to the window. I could sympathize with him, for had I not seen the same thing myself?

"It's certain, Dick," he said, when he returned a few moments later, "that, were I to see much more of Nikola in that house, I should go mad. But why did he let me see it? Why? Why? For Heaven's sake answer me."

How could I tell him the thought that was in my own mind? How could I reveal to him the awful fear that was slowly but surely taking possession of me? Why had Nikola invited the Don to his house? Why had he shown him the picture of that terrible crime? Like Glenbarth I could only ask the same question — Why? Why? Why?



CHAPTER 63

Before Glenbarth and I parted on the terrible evening described in the previous chapter, we had made a contract with each other to say nothing about what we had seen to the ladies. For this reason, when my wife endeavoured to interrogate me concerning our entertainment, I furnished her with an elaborate description of the dinner itself; spoke of the marvellous cooking, and I hope gave her a fairly accurate account of the *menu*, or rather so much of it as I could remember.

"I suppose I must confess to defeat then," she said, when I had exhausted my powers of narration. "I had a settled conviction that something out of the common would have occurred. You seem simply to have had a good dinner, to have smoked some excellent cigars, and the rest to have been bounded merely by the commonplace. For once I fear Doctor Nikola has not acted up to his reputation."

If she had known the truth, I wonder what she would have said? Long after she had bade me good-night I lay awake ruminating on the different events of the evening. The memory of what I had seen in that awful room was still as fresh with me as if I were still watching it. And yet, I asked myself, why should I worry so much about it? Nikola had willed that his audience should see certain things. We had done so. It was no more concerned with the supernatural than I was myself. Any man who had the power could have impressed us in the same way. But though I told myself all this, I must confess that I was by no means convinced. I knew in my heart that the whole thing had been too real to be merely a matter of make-believe. No human brain could have invented the ghastly horrors of that room in such complete detail. Even to think of it now, is to bring the scene almost too vividly before me; and when I lay awake at night I seem to hear the shrieks of the wretched woman, and the moans of the man perishing in the vaults below.

On my retiring to rest my wife had informed me that she fancied Miss Trevor had been slightly better that evening. She had slept peacefully for upwards of an hour, and seemed much refreshed by it.

"Her maid is going to spend the night in her room," said Phyllis; "I have told her that, if she sees any change in Gertrude's condition, she is to let me know at once. I do hope that she may be herself again to-morrow."

This, however, was unhappily not destined to be the case; for a little before three o'clock, there was a tapping upon our bedroom door. Guessing who it would be, my wife went to it, and, having opened it a little, was informed that Miss Trevor was worse.

"I must go to her at once," said Phyllis, and, having clothed herself warmly, for the night was cold, she departed to our guest's room.

"I am really afraid that there is something very serious the matter with her," she said, when she returned after about a quarter of an hour's absence. "She is in a high state of fever, and is inclined to be delirious. Don't you think we had better send for the doctor?"

"I will have a messenger despatched to him at once if you think it necessary," I returned. "Poor girl, I wonder what on earth it can be?"

"Perhaps the doctor will be able to tell us now," said my wife. "The symptoms are more fully developed, and he should surely be able to make his diagnosis. But I must not stay here talking. I must go back to her."

When she had departed, I dressed myself and went down to the hall in search of the night watchman. He undertook to find a messenger to go and fetch the doctor, and, when I had seen him despatched on his errand, I returned to the drawing-room, switched on the electric light, and tried to interest myself in a book until the medico should arrive. I was not very successful, however, for interesting though I was given to understand the book was, I found my thoughts continually leaving it and returning to the house in the Rio del Consiglio. I wondered what Nikola was doing at that moment, and fancied I could picture him still at work, late though the hour was. At last, tiring of the book and wanting something else to occupy my thoughts, I went to the window and drew back the shutters. It was a beautiful morning, and the myriad stars overhead were reflected in the black waters of the canal like the lamps of a large town. Not a sound was to be heard; it might have been a City of the Dead, so still was it. As I stood looking across the water, I thought of the city's past history, of her ancient grandeur, of her wondrous art, and of the great men who had been her children. There was a tremendous lesson to be learnt from her Fall if one could only master it. I was interrupted in my reverie by the entrance of

the doctor, whom I had told the night watchman to conduct to my presence immediately upon his arrival.

"I am sorry to bring you out at this time of the night, doctor," I said; "but the fact is, Miss Trevor is much worse. My wife spent the greater part of the evening with her, and informed me on my return from a dinner that she was better. Three-quarters of an hour ago, however, her maid, who had been sleeping in her room, came to us with the news that a change for the worse had set in. This being the case, I thought it better to send for you at once."

"You did quite right, my dear sir, quite right," the medico replied. "There is nothing like promptness in these matters. Perhaps I had better see her without further delay."

With that I conducted him to the door of Miss Trevor's room. He knocked upon it, was admitted by my wife, and then disappeared from my gaze. Something like half-an-hour elapsed before he returned to me in the drawing-room. When he did so his face looked grave and troubled.

"What do you think of her condition now, doctor?" I asked.

"She is certainly in a state of high fever," he answered. "Her pulse is very high, and she is inclined to be delirious. At the same time I am bound to confess to you that I am at a loss to understand the reason of it. The case puzzled me considerably yesterday, but I am even more puzzled by it now. There are various symptoms that I can neither account for nor explain. One thing, however, is quite certain — the young lady must have a trained nurse, and, with your permission, I will see that one comes in after breakfast. Lady Hatteras is not strong enough for the task."

"I am quite with you there," I answered. "And I am vastly obliged to you for putting your foot down. At the same time, will you tell me whether you deem it necessary for me to summon her father from England?"

"So far as I can see at present, I do not think there is any immediate need," he replied. "Should I see any reason for so doing, I would at once tell you. I have given a prescription to Lady Hatteras, and furnished her with the name of a reliable chemist. I shall return between nine and ten o'clock, and shall hope to have better news for you then."

"I sincerely trust you may," I said. "As you may suppose, her illness has been a great shock to us."

I then escorted him down-stairs and afterwards returned to my bedroom. The news which he had given me of Miss Trevor's condition was most distressing, and made me feel more anxious than I cared to admit. At seven o'clock I saw my wife for a few minutes, but, as before, she had no good news to give me.

"She is quite delirious now," she said, "and talks continually of some great trouble which she fears is going to befall her; implores me to help her to escape from it, but will not say definitely what it is. It goes to my heart to hear her, and to know that I cannot comfort her."

"You must be careful what you are doing," I replied. "The doctor has promised to bring a trained nurse with him after breakfast, who will relieve you of the responsibility. I inquired whether he thought we had better send for her father, and it is in a way encouraging to know that, so far, he does not think there is any necessity for such an extreme step. In the meantime, however, I think I will write to the Dean and tell him how matters stand. It will prepare him, but I am afraid it will give the poor old gentleman a sad fright."

"It could not give him a greater fright than it has done us," said Phyllis. "I do not know why I should do so, but I cannot help thinking that I am to blame in some way."

"What nonsense, my dear girl," I replied. "I am sure you have nothing whatsoever to reproach yourself with. Far from it. You must not worry yourself about it, or we shall be having you upon our hands before long. You must remember that you are yourself far from strong."

"I am quite myself again now," she answered. "It is only on account of your anxiety that I treat myself as an invalid." Then she added, "I wonder what the Duke will say when he hears the news?"

"He was very nearly off his head yesterday," I answered. "He will be neither to hold nor to bind to-day."

She was silent for a few moments, then she said thoughtfully —

"Do you know, Dick, it may seem strange to you, but I do not mind saying that I attribute all this trouble to Nikola."

"Good gracious," I cried, in well-simulated amazement, "why on earth to Nikola?"

"Because, as was the case five years ago, it has been all trouble since we met him. You remember how he affected Gertrude at the outset. She was far from being herself on the night of our tour through the city, and now in her delirium she talks continually of his dreadful house, and from what she says, and the way she behaves, I cannot help feeling inclined

to believe that she imagines herself to be seeing some of the dreadful events which have occurred or are occurring in it."

"God help her," I said to myself. And then I continued aloud to my wife, "Doubtless Nikola's extraordinary personality has affected her in some measure, as it does other people, but you are surely not going to jump to the conclusion that because she has spoken to him he is necessarily responsible for her illness? That would be the wildest flight of fancy."

"And yet, do you know," she continued, "I have made a curious discovery."

"What is that?" I asked, not without some asperity, for, having so much on my mind, I was not in the humour for fresh discoveries.

She paused for a moment before she replied. Doubtless she expected that I would receive it with scepticism, if not with laughter; and Phyllis, ever since I have known her, has a distinct fear of ridicule.

"You may laugh at me if you please," she said, "yet the coincidence is too extraordinary to be left unnoticed. Do you happen to be aware, Dick, that Doctor Nikola called at this hotel at exactly eleven o'clock?"

I almost betrayed myself in my surprise. This was the last question I expected her to put to me.

"Yes," I answered, with an endeavour to appear calm, "I do happen to be aware of that fact. He merely paid a visit of courtesy to the Don, prior to the other's accepting his hospitality. I see nothing remarkable in that. I did the same myself, if you remember."

"Of course I know that," she replied, "but there is more to come. Are you also aware that it was at the very moment of his arrival in the house that Gertrude was taken ill? What do you think of that?"

She put this question to me with an air of triumph, as if it were one that no argument on my part could refute. At any rate, I did not attempt the task.

"I think nothing of it," I replied. "You may remember that you once fell down in a dead faint within a few minutes of the vicar's arrival at our house at home. Would you therefore have me suppose that it was on account of his arrival that you were taken ill? Why should you attribute Miss Trevor's illness to Nikola's courtesy to our friend the Don?"

"I beg that you will not call him our friend," said Phyllis with considerable dignity. "I do not like the man."

I did not tell her that the Duke was equally outspoken concerning our companion. I could see that they would put their heads together, and that trouble would be the inevitable result. Like a wise husband I held my peace, knowing that whatever I might say would not better the situation.

Half-an-hour later it was my unhappy lot to have to inform Glenbarth of Miss Trevor's condition.

"I told you yesterday that it was a matter not to be trifled with," he said, as if I were personally responsible for her grave condition. "The doctor evidently doesn't understand the case, and what you ought to do, if you have any regard for her life, is to send a telegram at once to London, ordering competent advice."

"The Dean of Bedminster has a salary of eight hundred pounds per annum," I answered quietly. "Such a man as you would want me to send for would require a fee of some hundreds of guineas to make such a journey."

"And you would allow her to die for the sake of a few paltry pounds?" he cried. "Good heavens, Dick, I never thought you were a money-grabber."

"I am glad you did not," I answered. "It is of her father I am thinking. Besides, I do not know that the doctor here is as ignorant as you say. He has a most complicated and unusual case to deal with, and I honour him for admitting the fact that he does not understand it. Many men in his profession would have thrown dust in our eyes, and have pretended to a perfect knowledge of the case."

The young man did not see it in the same light as I did, and was plainly of the opinion that we were not doing what we might for the woman he loved. My wife, however, took him in hand after breakfast, and talked quietly but firmly to him. She succeeded where I had failed, and when I returned from an excursion to the chemist's, where I had the prescriptions made up, I found him in a tolerably reasonable frame of mind.

At a quarter to ten the doctor put in an appearance once more, and, after a careful inspection of his patient, informed me that it was his opinion that a consultant should be called in. This was done, and to our dismay the result came no nearer elucidating the mystery than before. The case was such a one as had never entered into the experience of either man. To all intents and purposes there was nothing that would in any way account for the patient's condition. The fever had left her, and she complained of no pain, while her mind, save for occasional relapses, was clear enough. They were

certain it was not a case of paralysis, yet she was incapable of moving, or of doing anything to help herself. The duration of her illness was not sufficient to justify her extreme weakness, nor to account for the presence of certain other symptoms. There was nothing for it, therefore, but for us to possess our souls in patience and to wait the turn of events. When the doctors had departed I went in search of Glenbarth, and gave him their report. The poor fellow was far from being consoled by it. He had hoped to receive good news, and their inability to give a satisfactory decision only confirmed his belief in their incompetency. Had I permitted him to do so, he would have telegraphed at once for the best medical advice in Europe, and would have expended half his own princely revenues in an attempt to make her herself once more. It was difficult to convince him that he had not the right to heap liabilities on the old gentleman's shoulder, which, in honour bound, he would feel he must repay.

I will not bore my readers with the abusive arguments against society, and social etiquette, with which he favoured me in reply to my speech. The poor fellow was beside himself with anxiety, and it was difficult to make him understand that, because he had not placed a narrow band of gold upon a certain pretty finger, he was debarred from saving the life of the owner of that self-same finger. Towards nightfall it was certain that Miss Trevor's condition was gradually going from bad to worse. With the closing of the day the delirium had returned, and the fever had also come with it. We spent a wretchedly anxious night, and in the morning, at the conclusion of his first visit, the doctor informed me that, in his opinion, it would be advisable that I should telegraph to the young lady's father. This was an extreme step, and, needless to say, it caused me great alarm. It was all so sudden that it was scarcely possible to realize the extent of the calamity. Only two days before Miss Trevor had been as well as any of us, and certainly in stronger health than my wife. Now she was lying, if not at death's door, at least at no great distance from that grim portal. Immediately this sad intelligence was made known to me I hastened to the telegraph-office, and despatched a message to the Dean, asking him to come to us with all possible speed. Before luncheon I received a reply to the effect that he had already started. Then we sat ourselves down to wait and to watch, hoping almost against hope that this beautiful, happy young life might be spared to us. All this time we had seen nothing of the Don or of Nikola. The former, however, had heard of Miss Trevor's illness, and sent polite messages as to her condition. I did not tell Glenbarth of this, for the young man had sufficient to think of just then without my adding to his worries.

I must pass on now to describe to you the arrival of the Dean of Bedminster in Venice. Feeling that he would be anxious to question me concerning his daughter's condition, I made a point of going to meet him alone. Needless to say he was much agitated on seeing me, and implored me to give him the latest bulletin.

"God's will be done," he said quietly, when he had heard all I had to tell him. "I did not receive your letter," he remarked, as we made our way from the station in the direction of Galaghetti's hotel, "so that you will understand that I know nothing of the nature of poor Gertrude's illness. What does the doctor say is the matter with her?"

I then informed him how the case stood, and of the uncertainty felt by the two members of the medical profession I had called in. "Surely that is very singular, is it not?" he asked, when I had finished. "There are not many diseases left that they are unable to diagnose."

"In this case, however, I fear they are at a loss to assign a name to it," I said. "However, you will be able very soon to see her for yourself, and to draw your own conclusions."

The meeting between the worthy old gentleman and his daughter was on his side affecting in the extreme. She did not recognize him, nor did she know my wife. When he joined me in the drawing-room a quarter of an hour or so later his grief was pitiful to witness. While we were talking Glenbarth entered, and I introduced them to each other. The Dean knew nothing of the latter's infatuation for his daughter, but I fancy, after a time, he must have guessed that there was something in the wind from the other's extraordinary sympathy with him in his trial. As it happened the old gentleman had not arrived any too soon. That afternoon Miss Trevor was decidedly worse, and the medical men expressed their gravest fears for her safety. All that day and the next we waited in suspense, but there was no material change. Nature was fighting her battle stubbornly, inch by inch. The girl did not seem any worse, nor was there any visible improvement. On the doctor's advice a third physician was called in, but with no greater success than before. Then on one never-to-be-forgotten afternoon the first doctor took me on one side and informed me that in his opinion, and those of his colleagues, it would not be wise to cherish any further hopes. The patient was undeniably weaker, and was growing more so every hour. With a heart surcharged with sorrow I went to the Dean's room and broke the news to him. The poor old man heard me out in silence, and then walked to the window and looked down upon the Grand Canal. After a while he turned, and coming back

to me once more laid his hand upon my arm.

"If it is the Lord's will that I lose her, what can I do but submit?" he said. "When shall I be allowed to see her?"

"I will make inquiries," I answered, and hastened away in search of the doctor. As I passed along the passage I met Galaghetti. The little man had been deeply grieved to hear the sad intelligence, and hastened in search of me at once.

"M'lord," said he, for do what I would I could never cure him of the habit, "believe me it is not so hopeless, though they say so, if you will but listen to me. There is Doctor Nikola, your friend! He could cure her if you went to him. Did he not cure my child?"

I gave a start of surprise. I will confess that the idea had occurred to me, but I had never given the probability of putting it into execution a thought. Why should it not be done? Galaghetti had reminded me how Nikola had cured his child when she lay at the point of death, and the other doctors of Venice had given her up. He was so enthusiastic in his praises of the doctor that I felt almost inclined to risk it. When I reached the drawing-room Glenbarth hastened towards me.

"What news?" he inquired, his anxiety showing itself plainly upon his face.

I shook my head.

"For God's sake don't trifle with me," he cried. "You can have no idea what I am suffering."

Feeling that it would be better if I told him everything, I made a clean breast of it. He heard me out before he spoke.

"She must not die," he said, with the fierceness of despair. "If there is any power on earth that can be invoked, it shall be brought to bear. Can you not think of anything? Try! Remember that every second is of importance."

"Would it be safe to try Nikola?" I inquired, looking him steadfastly in the face. "Galaghetti is wild for me to do so."

In spite of his dislike to Nikola, Glenbarth jumped at the suggestion as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

"Let us find him at once," he cried, seizing me by the arm. "If any one can save her he is the man. Let us go to him without a moment's delay."

"No, no," I answered, "that will never do. Even in a case of such gravity the proprieties must be observed. I must consult the doctors before calling in another."

I regret very much to say that here the Duke made use of some language that was neither parliamentary nor courteous to those amiable gentlemen.

I sought them out and placed the matter before them. To the idea of calling in a fourth consultant they had not the least objection, though they were all of the opinion that it could do no good. When, however, I mentioned the fact that that consultant's name was Nikola, I could plainly see that a storm was rising.

"Gentlemen," I said, "you must forgive me if I speak plainly and to the point. You have given us to understand that your patient's case is hopeless. Now I have had considerable experience of Doctor Nikola's skill, and I feel that we should not be justified in withholding him from our counsel, if he will consent to be called in. I have no desire to act contrary to medical etiquette, but we must remember that the patient's life comes before aught else."

One doctor looked at the other, and all shook their heads.

"I fear," said the tallest of them, who invariably acted as spokesman, "that if the services of the gentleman in question are called in, it will be necessary for my colleagues and myself to abandon our interest in the case. I do not of course know how far your knowledge extends, but I hope you will allow me to say, sir, that the most curious stories are circulated both as to the behaviour and the attainments of this Doctor Nikola."

Though I knew it to be true, his words nettled me. And yet I had such a deeply-rooted belief in Nikola that, although they were determined to give up the case, I felt we should still be equally, if not more, powerful without them.

"I sincerely hope, gentlemen," I said, "that you will not do as you propose. Nevertheless, I feel that I should not be myself acting rightly if I were to allow your professional prejudices to stand in the way of my friend's recovery."

"In that case I fear there is nothing left to us but to most reluctantly withdraw," said one of the men.

"You are determined?"

"Quite determined," they replied together. Then the tallest added, "We much regret it, but our decision is irrevocable."

Ten minutes later they had left the hotel in a huff, and I found myself seated upon the horns of a serious dilemma.

What would my position be if Nikola's presence should exercise a bad effect upon the patient, or if he should decline to render us assistance? In that case I should have offended the best doctors in Venice, and should in all probability have killed her. It was a nice position to be placed in. One thing, however, was as certain as anything could be, and that was the fact that there was no time to lose. My wife was seriously alarmed when I informed her of my decision, but both Glenbarth and I felt that we were acting for the best, and the Dean sided with us.

"Since you deem it necessary, go in search of Doctor Nikola at once," said my wife, when the latter had left us. "Implore him to come without delay; in another hour it may be too late." Then in a heart-broken whisper she added, "She is growing weaker every moment. Oh, Dick, Heaven grant that we are not acting wrongly, and that he may be able to save her."

"I feel convinced that we are doing right," I answered. "And now I will go in search of Nikola, and if possible bring him back with me."

"God grant you may be successful in your search," said Glenbarth, wringing my hand. "If Nikola saves her I will do anything he may ask, and still be grateful to him all the days of my life."

Then I set off upon my errand.



CHAPTER 64

With a heart as heavy as lead I made my way down-stairs, and having chartered a gondola, bade the man take me to the Palace Revecce with all possible haste. Old Galaghetti, who stood upon the steps, nodded vehement approval, and rubbed his hands with delight as he thought of the triumph his great doctor must inevitably achieve. As I left the hotel I looked back at it with a feeling of genuine sorrow. Only a few days before our party had all been so happy together, and now one was stricken down with a mysterious malady that, so far as I could see, was likely to end in her death. Whether the gondolier had been admonished by Galaghetti to make haste, and was anxious to do so in sympathy with my trouble, I cannot say; the fact, however, remains that we accomplished the distance that separated the hotel from the palace in what could have been little more than half the time usually taken. My star was still in the ascendant when we reached the palace, for when I had disembarked at the steps, the old man who did menial service for Nikola, had just opened it and looked out. I inquired whether his master was at home, and, if so, whether I could see him? He evidently realized that my Italian was of the most rudimentary description, for it was necessary for me to repeat my question three or four times before he could comprehend my meaning. When at last he did so, he pointed up the stairs to signify that Nikola *was* at home, and also that, if I desired to see him, I had better go in search of him. I immediately did so, and hastened up the stairs to the room I have already described, and of which I entertained such ghastly recollections. I knocked upon the door, and a well-known voice bade me in English to “come in.” I was in too great a haste to fulfil my mission to observe at the time the significance these words contained. It was not until afterwards that I remembered the fact that, as we approached the palace, I had looked up at Nikola’s window and had seen no sign of him there. As I had not rung the bell, but had been admitted by the old man-servant, how could he have become aware of my presence? But, as I say, I thought of all that afterwards. For the moment the only desire I had was to inform Nikola of my errand.

Upon my entering the room I found Nikola standing before a table on which were glasses, test-tubes, and various chemical paraphernalia. He was engaged in pouring some dark-coloured liquid into a graduating glass, and when he spoke it was without looking round at me.

“I am very glad to see you, my dear Hatteras,” he said. “It is kind of you to take pity on my loneliness. If you don’t mind sitting down for a few moments, and lighting a cigar — you’ll find the box on the table — I shall have finished this, and then we can talk.”

“But I am afraid I can’t wait,” I answered. “I have come on the most important business. There is not a moment to lose.”

“In that case I am to suppose that Miss Trevor is worse,” he said, putting down the bottle from which he had been pouring, and afterwards replacing the glass stopper with the same hand. “I was afraid it might be so.”

“How do you know that she is ill?” I asked, not a little surprised to hear that he was aware of our trouble.

“I manage to know a good many things,” he replied. “I was aware that she was ill, and have been wondering how long it would be before I was called in. The other doctors don’t like my interference, I suppose?”

“They certainly do not,” I answered. “But they have done no good for her.”

“And you think I may be able to help you?” he inquired, looking at me over the graduating glass with his strange, dark eyes.

“I certainly do,” I replied.

“I am your debtor for the compliment.”

“And you will come?”

“You really wish it?”

“I believe it is the only thing that will save her life,” I answered. “But you must come quickly, or it will be too late. She was sinking when I left the hotel.”

With a hand that never shook he poured the contents of the glass into a small phial, and then placed the latter in his pocket.

“I am at your disposal now,” he answered. “We will set off as soon as you like. As you say, we must lose no time.”

"But will it not be necessary for you to take some drugs with you?" I asked.

"I am taking this one," he replied, placing his hat upon his head as he spoke.

I remembered that he had been making his prescription up as I entered the room. Had he then intended calling to see her, even supposing I had not come to ask his assistance? I had no chance of putting the question to him, however.

"Have you a gondola below?" he asked, as we went down the stairs.

I replied in the affirmative; and when we gained the hall door we descended the steps and took our places in it. On reaching the hotel I conducted him to the drawing-room, where we found the Dean and Glenbarth eagerly awaiting our coming. I presented the former to Nikola, and then went off to inform my wife of his arrival. She accompanied me back to the drawing-room, and when she entered the room Nikola crossed it to receive her. Though she looked at him in a frightened way I thought his manner soon put her at her ease.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to take me to my patient," he said, when they had greeted each other. "As the case is so serious, I had better lose no time in seeing her."

He followed my wife from the room, and then we sat down to await his verdict, with what anxiety you may imagine.

Of all that transpired during his stay with Miss Trevor I can only speak from hearsay. My wife, however, was unfortunately too agitated to remember everything that occurred. She informed me that on entering the room he advanced very quietly towards the bed, and for a few moments stood looking down at the frail burden it supported. Then he felt her pulse, lifted the lids of her eyes, and for a space during which a man might have counted fifty slowly, laid his hand upon her forehead.

Then, turning to the nurse, who had of course heard of the withdrawal of the other doctors, he bade her bring him a wine-glass of iced water. She disappeared, and while she was absent Nikola sat by the bedside holding the sick girl's hand, and never for a moment taking his eyes from her face. Presently the woman returned, bringing the water as directed. He took it from her, and going to the window poured from a phial, which he had taken from his pocket, some twenty drops of the dark liquid it contained. Then with a spoon he gave her nearly half of the contents of the glass. This done he once more seated himself beside the bed, and waited patiently for the result. Several times within the next half-hour he bent over the recumbent figure, and was evidently surprised at not seeing some change which he expected would take place. At the end of that time he gave her another spoonful of the liquid, and once more sat down to watch. When an hour had passed he permitted a sigh of satisfaction to escape him, then, turning to my wife, whose anxiety was plainly expressed upon her face, he said —

“I think, Lady Hatteras, that you may tell them that she will not die. There is still much to be done, but I pledge my word that she will live.”

The reaction was too much for my wife; she felt as if she were choking, then she turned giddy, and at last was possessed with a frantic desire to cry. Softly leaving the room, she came in search of us. The moment that she opened the door of the drawing-room, and I looked upon her face, I knew that there was good news for us.

“What does he say about her?” cried the Duke, forgetting the Dean's presence, while the latter rose and drew a step nearer, without speaking a word.

“There is good news,” she said, fumbling with her handkerchief in a suspicious manner. “Doctor Nikola says she will live.”

“Thank God,” we all said in one breath. And Glenbarth murmured something more that I did not catch.

So implicit was our belief in Nikola that, as you have doubtless observed, we accepted his verdict without a second thought. I kissed my wife, and then shook hands solemnly with the Dean. The Duke had meanwhile vanished, presumably to his own apartment, where he could meditate on certain matters undisturbed. After that Phyllis left us and returned to the sick-room, where she found Nikola still seated beside the bed, just as she had left him. So far as she could judge, Miss Trevor did not appear to be any different, though perhaps she did not breathe as heavily as she had hitherto done. Nikola, however, appeared to be well satisfied. He nodded approvingly to Phyllis as she entered, and then returned to his contemplation of his patient once more. In this fashion hour after hour went by. Once during each my wife would come to me with reassuring bulletins. “Miss Trevor was, if anything, a little better, she did not seem so restless as before.” “The fever seemed to be abating;” and then, towards nine o'clock that night, “at last Gertrude was sleeping peacefully.” It was not, however, until nearly midnight that Nikola himself made his appearance.

“The worst is over,” he said, approaching the Dean; “your daughter is now asleep, and will only require watching for the next two hours. At the end of that time I shall return, and shall hope to find a decided improvement in her condition.”

“I can never thank you enough, my dear sir,” said the worthy old clergyman, shaking the other by the hand while the tears ran down his wrinkled cheeks. “But for your wonderful skill there can be no sort of doubt that she would be lost to us now. She is my only child, my ewe lamb, and may Heaven bless you for your goodness to me.”

I thought that Nikola looked at him rather curiously as he said this. It was the first time I had seen Nikola brought into the society of a dignitary of the English Church, and I was anxious to see how the pair comported themselves under the circumstances. A couple more diametrically opposite could be scarcely imagined. They were as oil and water, and could scarcely be expected to assimilate.

“Sir, I should have been less than human if I had not done everything possible to save that beautiful young life,” said Nikola, with what was to me the suggestion of a double meaning in his speech. “And now you must permit me to bid you good-bye for the present. In two hours I shall return again.”

Thinking he might prefer to remain near his patient, I pressed him to stay at the hotel, offering to do all that lay in my power to make him comfortable. But he would not hear of such a thing.

“As you should be aware by this time, I never rest away from my own house,” he answered, in a tone that settled the matter once and for all. “If anything should occur in the meantime, send for me and I will come at once. I do not apprehend any change, however.”

When he had gone I went in search of the Duke and found him in his own room.

"Dick," he said, "look at me and tell me if you can see any difference. I feel as though I had passed through years of suffering. Another week would have made an old man of me. How is she now?"

"Progressing famously," I answered. "You need not look so sceptical, for this must surely be the case, since Nikola has gone home to take some rest and will not return for two hours."

He wrung my hand on hearing this.

"How little I dreamt," he said, "when we were confined in that wretched room in Port Said, and when he played that trick upon me in Sydney, that some day he was destined to do me the greatest service any man has ever done me in my life. Didn't I tell you that those other medicos did not know what they were doing, and that Nikola is the greatest doctor in the world?"

I admitted that he had given me the first assurance, but I was not quite so certain about the latter. Then, realizing how he must be feeling, I proposed that we should row down the canal for a breath of fresh sea air. At first the Duke was for refusing the invitation, eventually however he assented, and when we had induced the Dean to accompany us we set off. When we reached the hotel once more it was to discover that Nikola had returned, and that he had again taken up his watch in the sick-room. He remained there all night, passing hour after hour at the bedside, without, so my wife asserted, moving, save to give the medicine, and without apparently feeling the least fatigue.

It was not until between seven and eight o'clock next morning that I caught a glimpse of him. He was in the dining-room then, partaking of a small cup of black coffee, into which he had poured some curious decoction of his own. For my part I have never yet been able to discover how Nikola managed to keep body and soul together on his frugal fare.

"How is the patient this morning?" I asked, when we had greeted each other.

"Out of danger," he replied, slowly stirring his coffee as he spoke. "She will continue to progress now. I hope you are satisfied that I have done all I can in her interests?"

"I am more than satisfied," I answered. "I am deeply grateful. As her father said yesterday, if it had not been for you, Nikola, she must inevitably have succumbed. She will have cause to bless your name for the remainder of her existence."

He looked at me very curiously as I said this.

"Do you think she will do that?" he asked, with unusual emphasis. "Do you think it will please her to remember that she owes her life to *me*?"

"I am sure she will always be deeply grateful," I replied, somewhat ambiguously. "I fancy you know that yourself."

"And your wife? What does she say?"

"She thinks you are certainly the greatest of all doctors," I answered, with a laugh. "I feel that I ought to be jealous, but strangely enough I'm not."

"And yet I have done nothing so very wonderful," he continued, almost as if he were talking to himself. "But that those other blind worms are content to go on digging in their mud, when they should be seeking the light in another direction, they could do as much as I have done. By the way, have you seen our friend, Don Martinos, since you dined together at my house?"

I replied to the effect that I had not done so, but reported that the Don had sent repeated messages of sympathy to us during Miss Trevor's illness. I then inquired whether Nikola had seen him?

"I saw him yesterday morning," he replied. "We devoted upwards of four hours to exploring the city together."

I could not help wondering how the Don had enjoyed the excursion, but, needless to remark, I did not say anything on this score to my companion.

That night Nikola was again in attendance upon his patient. Next day she was decidedly better; she recognized her father and my wife, and every hour was becoming more and more like her former self.

"Was she surprised when she regained consciousness to find Nikola at her bedside?" I inquired of Phyllis when the great news was reported to me.

"Strangely enough she was not," Phyllis replied. "I fully expected, remembering my previous suspicions, that it would have a bad effect upon her, but it did nothing of the kind. It was just as if she had expected to find him there."

"And what were his first words to her?"

"I hope you are feeling better, Miss Trevor," he said, and she replied, 'Much better,' that was all. It was as

commonplace as could be.”

Next day Nikola only looked in twice, the day after once, and at the end of the week informed me that she stood in no further need of his attention.

“How shall we ever be able to reward you, Nikola?” I asked, for about the hundredth time, as we stood together in the corridor outside the sick-room.

“I have no desire to be rewarded,” he answered. “It is enough for me to see Miss Trevor restored to health. Endeavour, if you can, to recall a certain conversation we had together respecting the lady in question on the evening that I narrated to you the story concerning the boy, who was so badly treated by the Spanish Governor. Did I not tell you then that our Destinies were inextricably woven together? I informed you that it had been revealed to me many years ago that we should meet; should you feel surprised, therefore, if I told you that I had also been warned of this illness?”

Once more I found myself staring at him in amazement.

“You are surprised? Believe me, however astonishing it may seem, it is quite true. I knew that Miss Trevor would come into my life; I knew also that it would be my lot to save her from death. What is more, I know that in the end the one thing, which has seemed to me most desirable in life, will be taken from me by her hands.”

“I am afraid I cannot follow you,” I said.

“Perhaps not, but you will be able to some day,” he answered. “That moment has not yet arrived. In the meantime watch and wait, for before we know it it will be upon us.”

Then, with a look that was destined to haunt me for many a long day, he bade me farewell, and left the hotel.



CHAPTER 65

To the joy of every one, by the Thursday following Miss Trevor was sufficiently recovered to be able to leave her room. It was a happy day for every one concerned, particularly for the Duke, who came nearer presenting the appearance of an amiable lunatic on that occasion than I had ever seen him before. Why my wife should have encouraged him in his extravagance I cannot say, but the fact remains that she allowed him to go out with her that morning with the professed idea of purchasing a few flowers to decorate the drawing-room for the invalid's reception. So great was their extravagance that the room more resembled a hot-house, or a flower-show, than a civilized apartment. I pointed this out to my wife with a gentle remonstrance, and was informed that, being a mere husband, I knew nothing at all about the matter. I trust that I preserved my balance and lived up to my reputation for sanity in the midst of this general excitement, though I am prepared to confess that I was scarcely myself when the triumphal procession, consisting of my wife and the Dean, set off to the invalid's apartment to escort her in. When she appeared it was like a ghost of her former self, and a poor wan ghost too. Her father, of course, she had already seen, but neither I nor Glenbarth had of course had the honour of meeting her since she was taken ill. She received him very graciously, and was kind enough to thank me for the little I had done for her. We seated her between us in a comfortable chair, placed a footstool under her feet, and then, in order that she should not have too much excitement, and that she might rest quietly, the Dean, the Duke, and myself were sent about our business for an hour. When we returned, a basket of exquisite roses stood on the table, and on examining it the card of Don Josè de Martinos was found to be attached to it.

It is some proof of the anxiety that Glenbarth felt not to do anything that might worry her, when I say that he read the card and noted the giver without betraying the least trace of annoyance. It is true that he afterwards furnished me with his opinion of the giver for presuming to send them, but the casual observer would have declared, had he been present to observe the manner in which he behaved when he had first seen the gift, that he had taken no interest in the matter at all.

Next day Miss Trevor was permitted to get up a little earlier, and on the day following a little earlier still. In the meantime more flowers had arrived from the Don, while he himself had twice made personal inquiries as to the progress she was making. It was not until the third day of her convalescence that Nikola called to see his patient. I was sitting alone with her at the time, my wife and our other two guests having gone shopping in the Merceria. I was idly cutting a copy of a Tauchnitz publication that I had procured for her on the previous day. The weather was steadily growing warmer, and, for this reason, the windows were open and a flood of brilliant sunshine was streaming into the room. From the canal outside came the sounds of rippling laughter, then an unmistakably American voice called out, "Say, girls, what do you think of Venice now you're here?" Then another voice replied, "Plenty of water about, but they don't seem to wash their buildings much." Miss Trevor was about to speak, in fact she had opened her lips to do so, when a strange expression appeared upon her face. She closed her eyes for a moment, and I began to fear that she was ill. When she opened them again I was struck by a strange fact; the eyes were certainly there, but there was no sort of life in them. They were like those of a sleep-walker who, while his eyes are open, sees nothing of things about him. A moment later there was a knock at the door, and Doctor Nikola, escorted by a servant, entered the room. Wishing us "good-morning," he crossed the room and shook hands with Miss Trevor, afterwards with myself.

"You are certainly looking better," he said, addressing his patient, and placing his finger and thumb upon her wrist as he spoke.

"I am much better," she answered, but for some reason without her usual animation.

"In that case I think this will be the last visit I shall pay you in my professional capacity," he said. "You have been an excellent patient, and in the interests of what our friend Sir Richard here calls Science, permit me to offer you my grateful thanks."

"It is I who should thank you," she answered, as if she were repeating some lesson she had learnt by heart.

"I trust then, on the principle that one seldom or never acts as one should, that you will not do it," he replied, with a smile. "I am amply rewarded by observing that the flush of health is returning to your cheeks."

He then inquired after my wife's health, bade me be careful of her for the reason that, since I had behaved so outrageously towards them, no other doctors in Venice would attend her, should she be taken ill, and then rose to bid us

adieu.

"This is a very short visit," I said. "Cannot we persuade you to give us a little more of your society?"

"I fear not," he answered. "I am developing quite a practice in Venice, and my time is no longer my own."

"You have other patients?" I asked, in some surprise, for I did not think he would condescend to such a thing.

"I have your friend, Don Martinos, now upon my hands," he said. "The good Galaghetti is so abominably grateful for what I did for his child, that he will insist on trying to draw me into experimenting upon other people."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what is the matter with the Don?" I said. "He does not look like a man who would be likely to be an invalid."

"I do not think there is so very much wrong with him," Nikola replied vaguely. "At any rate it is not anything that cannot be very easily put right."

When he left the room I accompanied him down the corridor as far as the hall.

"The fact of the matter is," he began, when we were alone together, "our friend the Don has been running the machinery of life a little too fast of late. I am told that he lost no less a sum than fifty thousand pounds in English money last week, and certainly his nerves are not what they once were."

"He is a gambler, then?" I said.

"An inveterate gambler, I should say," Nikola answered. "And when a Spaniard takes to that sort of amusement, he generally does it most thoroughly."

Whatever the Don's illness may have been, it certainly had made its mark upon his appearance. I chanced to meet him that afternoon on the Rialto bridge, and was thunderstruck at the change. The man's face was white, and his eyes had dark rings under them, that to my thinking spoke for an enfeebled heart. When he stopped to speak to me, I noticed that his hands trembled as though he were afflicted with St. Vitus's dance.

"I hope Miss Trevor is better," he said, after I had commented upon the fact that I had not seen him of late.

"Much better," I answered. "In fact, she may now be said to be convalescent. I was sorry to hear from Doctor Nikola, however, that you yourself are not quite the thing."

"Nerves, only nerves," he answered, with what was almost a frightened look in his eyes. "Doctor Nikola will set me right in no time, I am sure of that. I have had a run of beastly luck lately, and it has upset me more than I can say."

I knew to what he referred, but I did not betray my knowledge. After that he bade me farewell, and continued his walk. That evening another exquisite basket of flowers arrived for Miss Trevor. There was no card attached to it, but as the Duke denied all knowledge of it, I felt certain as to whence it came. On the day following, for the first time since her illness, Miss Trevor was able to leave the house and to go for a short airing upon the canal. We were rejoiced to take her, and made arrangements for her comfort, but there was one young man who was more attentive than all the rest of the party put together. Would Miss Trevor like another cushion? Was she quite sure that she was comfortable? Would she have preferred a gondola to a barca? I said nothing, but I wondered what the Dean thought, for he is an observant old gentleman. As for the young lady herself, she accepted the other's attentions with the most charming good-humour, and thus all went merry as marriage-bells. On the day following she went out again, and on the afternoon of the next day felt so much stronger as to express a desire to walk for a short time on the piazza of St. Mark. We accordingly landed at the well-known steps, and strolled slowly towards the cathedral. It was a lovely afternoon, the air being soft and warm, with a gentle breeze blowing in from the sea.

It is needless for me to say that Glenbarth was in the Seventh Heaven of Delight, and was already beginning to drop sundry little confidences into my ear. Her illness had ruined the opportunity he had hoped to have had, but he was going to make up for it now. Indeed it looked very much as if she had at last made up her mind concerning him, but, having had one experience of the sex, I was not going to assure myself that all was satisfactory until a definite announcement was made by the lady herself. As it turned out it was just as well that I did so, for that afternoon, not altogether unexpectedly I must confess, was destined to prove the truth of the old saying that the course of true love never runs smooth. Miss Trevor, with the Duke on one side and my wife on the other, was slowly passing across the great square, when a man suddenly appeared before us from one of the shops on our right. This individual was none other than the Don Josè de Martinos, who raised his hat politely to the ladies and expressed his delight at seeing Miss Trevor abroad once more. As usual, he was faultlessly

dressed, and on the whole looked somewhat better in health than he had done when I had last seen him. By some means, I scarcely know how it was done, he managed to slip in between my wife and Miss Trevor, and in this order we made our way towards our usual resting-place, Florian's *café*. Never, since we had known him, had the Don exerted himself so much to please. The Duke, however, did not seem satisfied. His high spirits had entirely left him, and, in consequence, he was now as quiet as he had been talkative before. It was plain to all of us that the Don admired Miss Trevor, and that he wanted her to become aware of the fact. Next morning he made an excuse and joined our party again. At this the Duke's anger knew no bounds. Personally I must confess that I was sorry for the young fellow. It was very hard upon him, just as he was progressing so favourably, that another should appear upon the scene and distract the lady's attention. Yet there was only one way of ending it, if only he could summon up sufficient courage to do it. I fear, however, that he was either too uncertain as to the result, or that he dreaded his fate, should she consign him to the Outer Darkness, too much to put it into execution. For this reason he had to submit to sharing her smiles with the Spaniard, which, if only he could have understood it, was an excellent thing for his patience, and a salutary trial for his character.

Meanwhile my wife looked on in despair.

"I thought it was all settled," she said pathetically, on one occasion, "and now they are as far off as ever. Why on earth does that troublesome man come between them?"

"Because he has quite as much right to be there as the other," I answered. "If the Duke wants her, let him ask her, but that's just what he won't do. The whole matter should have been settled by now."

"It's all very well for you to say that," she returned. "The poor boy would have done it before Gertrude was taken ill, but that you opposed him."

"And a very proper proceeding too," I answered. "Miss Trevor was under my charge, and I was certainly not going to let any young man, doubtless very desirable, but who had only known her two days, propose to her, get sent about his business, render it impossible for our party to continue together, and by so doing take all the pleasure out of our holiday."

"So it was only of yourself you were thinking?" she returned, with that wonderful inconsistency that is such a marked trait in her character. "Why do you urge him now to do it?"

"Because Miss Gertrude is no longer under my charge," I answered. "Her father is here, and is able to look after her." Then an idea occurred to me, and I acted upon it at once.

"When you come to think of it, my dear," I said, as if I had been carefully considering the question, "why should the Don not make Gertrude as good a husband as Glenbarth? He is rich, doubtless comes of a very good family, and would certainly make a very presentable figure in society."

She stared at me aghast.

"Well," she said in astonishment, "I must say that I think you are a loyal friend. You know that the Duke has set his heart on marrying her, and yet you are championing the cause of his rival. I should never have thought it of you, Dick."

I hastened to assure her that I was not in earnest, but for a moment I almost fancy she thought I was.

"If you are on the Duke's side I wonder that you encourage Don Martinos to continue his visits," she went on, after the other matter had been satisfactorily settled. "I cannot tell you how much I dislike him. I feel that I would rather see Gertrude married to a crossing-sweeper than to that man. How she can even tolerate him, I do not know. I find it very difficult to do so."

"Poor Don," I said, "he does not appear to have made a very good impression. In common justice I must admit that, so far as I am concerned, he has been invariably extremely civil."

"Because he wants your interest. You are the head of the house."

"It is a pretty fiction — let it pass however."

She pretended not to notice my gibe.

"He is gambling away every halfpenny he possesses."

I regarded her with unfeigned astonishment. How could she have become aware of this fact? I put the question to her.

"Some one connected with the hotel told my maid, Phillipa," she answered. "They say he never returns to the hotel until between two and three in the morning."

"He is not married," I retorted.

She vouchsafed no remark to this speech, but, bidding me keep my eyes open, and beware lest there should be trouble between the two men, left me to my own thoughts.

The warning she had given me was not a futile one, for it needed only half an eye to see that Glenbarth and Martinos were desperately jealous of one another. They eyed each other when they met as if, at any moment, they were prepared to fly at each other's throats. Once the Duke's behaviour was such as to warrant my speaking to him upon the subject when we were alone together.

"My dear fellow," I said, "I must ask you to keep yourself in hand. I don't like having to talk to you, but I have to remember that there are ladies in the case."

"Then why on earth doesn't Martinos keep out of my way?" he asked angrily. "You pitch into me for getting riled, but you don't see how villainously rude he is to me. He contradicts me as often as he can, and, for the rest of the time, treats me as if I were a child."

"In return you treat him as if he were an outsider, and had no right to look at, much less to speak to, Miss Trevor. Nevertheless he is our friend — or if he is not our friend, he has at least been introduced to us by a friend. Now I have no desire that you should quarrel at all, but if you must do so, let it be when you are alone together, and also when you are out of the hotel."

I had no idea how literally my words were to be taken.

That night, according to a custom he had of late adopted, Martinos put in an appearance after dinner, and brought his guitar with him. As he bade us "good-evening" I looked at the Duke's face. It was pale and set as if he had at last come to an understanding with himself. Presently my wife and I sang a duet together, in a fashion that pointed very plainly to the fact that our thoughts were elsewhere. Miss Trevor thanked us in a tone that showed me that she also had given but small attention to our performance. Then Gertrude sang a song of Tosti's very prettily, and was rewarded with enthusiastic applause. After this the Don was called upon to perform. He took up his guitar, and having tuned it, struck a few chords and began to sing. Though I look back upon that moment now with real pain, I must confess that I do not think I had ever heard him sing better; the merry laughter of the song suited his voice to perfection. It was plainly a comic ditty with some absurd imitations of the farm-yard at the end of each verse. When he had finished, my wife politely asked him to give us a translation of the words. Fate willed that she should ask, I suppose, and also that he should answer it.

"It is a story of a foolish young man who loved a fair maid," he replied, speaking with the utmost deliberation. "Unfortunately, however, he was afraid to tell her of his love. He pined to be with her, yet, whenever he was desirous of declaring his passion, his courage failed him at the last moment, and he was compelled to talk of the most commonplace things, such as the animals upon his father's farm. At last she, tiring of such a laggard, sent him away in disgust to learn how to woo. In the meantime she married a man who was better acquainted with his business."

Whether the song was exactly as he described it, I am not in a position to say; the fact, however, remains that at least four of our party saw the insinuation and bitterly resented it. I saw the Duke's face flush and then go pale. I thought for a moment that he was going to say something, but he contented himself by picking up a book from the table at his side, and glancing carelessly at it. I could guess, by the way his hands gripped it, something of the storm that was raging in his breast. My wife, meanwhile, had turned the conversation into another channel by asking the Dean what he had thought of a certain old church he had visited that morning. This gave a little relief, but not very much. Ten minutes later the Don rose and bade us "good-night." With a sneer on his face, he even extended his good wish to the Duke, who bowed, but did not reply. When he had gone, my wife gave the signal for a general dispersal, and Glenbarth and I were presently left in the drawing-room alone. I half expected an immediate outburst, but to my surprise he said nothing on the subject. I had no intention of referring to it unless he did, and so the matter remained for the time in abeyance. After a conversation on general topics, lasting perhaps a quarter of an hour, we wished each other "good-night," and retired to our respective rooms. When I entered my wife's room later, I was prepared for the discussion which I knew was inevitable.

"What do you think of your friend now?" she asked, with a touch of sarcasm thrown into the word "friend." "You of course heard how he insulted the Duke?"

"I noticed that he did a very foolish thing, not only for his own interests with us, but also for several other reasons. You may rely upon it that if ever he had any chance with Gertrude —"

"He never had the remotest chance, I can promise you that," my wife interrupted.

"I say if ever he had a chance with Gertrude, he has lost it now. Surely that should satisfy you."

"It does not satisfy me that he should be rude to our guest at any time, but I am particularly averse to his insulting him in our presence."

"You need not worry yourself," I said. "In all probability you will see no more of him. I shall convey a hint to him upon the subject. It will not be pleasant for Anstruther's sake."

"Mr. Anstruther should have known better than to have sent him to us," she replied. "There is one thing I am devoutly thankful for, and that is that the Duke took it so beautifully. He might have been angry, and have made a scene. Indeed I should not have blamed him, had he done so."

I did not ask her, for reasons of my own, whether she was sure that his Grace of Glenbarth was not angry. I must confess that I was rendered more uneasy by the quiet way he had taken it, than if he had burst into an explosion. Concealed fires are invariably more dangerous than open ones.

Next morning after breakfast, while we were smoking together in the balcony, a note was brought to Glenbarth. He took it, opened it, and when he had read the contents, thrust it hastily into his pocket.

"No answer," he said, as he lit a cigar, and I thought his hand trembled a little as he put the match to it.

His face was certainly paler than usual, and there was a far-away look in his eyes that showed me that it was not the canal or the houses opposite that he was looking upon.

"There is something behind all this, and I must find out what it is," I said to myself. "Surely he can't be going to make a fool of himself."

I knew, however, that my chance of getting anything satisfactory out of him lay in saying nothing about the matter just then. I must play my game in another fashion.

"What do you say if we run down to Rome next week?" I asked, after a little pause. "My wife and Miss Trevor seem to think they would enjoy it. There are lots of people we know there just now."

"I shall be very pleased," he answered, but with a visible effort.

At any other time he would have jumped eagerly at the suggestion. Decidedly there was something wrong! At luncheon he was preoccupied, so much so that I could see Miss Trevor wondered what was the matter. Had she known the terrible suspicion that was growing in my own mind, I wonder what she would have said, and also how she would have acted?

That afternoon the ladies resolved to remain at home, and the Dean decided to stay with them. In consequence, the Duke and I went out together. He was still as quiet as he had been in the morning, but as yet I had not been able to screw up my courage to such a pitch as to be able to put the question to him. Once, however, I asked the reason for his quietness, and received the evasive reply "that he was not feeling quite up to the mark that day."

This time I came a little nearer the point.

"You are not worrying about that wretched fellow's rudeness, I hope?" I said, looking him fairly and squarely in the face.

"Not in the least," he answered. "Why should I be?"

"Well, because I know you are hot-tempered," I returned, rather puzzled to find an explanation for him.

"Oh, I'll have it out with him at some time or another, I have no doubt," he continued, and then changed the subject by referring to some letters he had had from home that day.

When later we returned to the hotel for afternoon tea, we found the two ladies eagerly awaiting our coming. From the moment that he entered the room, Miss Trevor was graciousness itself to the young man. She smiled upon him, and encouraged him, until he scarcely knew whether he was standing upon his head or his heels. I fancy she was anxious to compensate him for the Don's rudeness to him.

That evening we all complained of feeling tired, and accordingly went to bed early. I was the latest of the party, and my own man had not left my dressing-room more than a minute before he returned with the information that the Duke's valet would be glad if he could have a few words with me.

"Send him in," I said, and forthwith the man made his appearance.

"What is it, Henry?" I inquired. "Is your master not well?"

"I don't know what's wrong with his Grace, sir," the man replied. "I'm very much frightened about him, and I thought I

would come to you at once.”

“Why, what is the matter? He seemed well enough when I bade him good-night, half-an-hour or so ago.”

“It isn’t that, sir. He’s well enough in his body,” said the man. “There’s something else behind it all. I know, sir, you won’t mind my coming to you. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You had better tell me everything, then I shall know how to act. What do you think is the reason of it?”

“Well, sir, it’s like this,” Henry went on. “His Grace has been very quiet all day. He wrote a lot of letters this morning and put them in his dispatch-box. ‘I’ll tell you what to do with them later, Henry,’ he said when he had finished. Well, I didn’t think very much of that, but when to-night he asked me what I had made up my mind to do with myself if ever I should leave his service, and told me that he had put it down in his will that I was to have five hundred pounds if he should die before I left him, I began to think there was something the matter. Well, sir, I took his things to-night, and was in the act of leaving the room, when he called me back. ‘I’m going out early for a swim in the sea to-morrow morning,’ he said, ‘but I shan’t say anything to Sir Richard Hatteras about it, because I happen to know that he thinks the currents about here are dangerous. Well, one never knows what may turn up,’ he goes on to say, ‘and if, by any chance, Henry — though I hope such a thing will not happen — I should be caught, and should not return, I want you to give this letter to Sir Richard. But remember this, you are on no account to touch it until mid-day. Do you understand?’ I told him that I did, but I was so frightened, sir, by what he said, that I made up my mind to come and see you at once.”

This was disturbing intelligence indeed. From what he said there could be no doubt that the Don and Glenbarth contemplated fighting a duel. In that case what was to be done? To attempt to reason with the Duke in his present humour would be absurd, besides his honour was at stake, and, though I am totally against duels, that counts for something.

“I am glad you told me this, Henry,” I said, “for now I shall know how to act. Don’t worry about your master’s safety. Leave him to me. He is safe in my hands. He shall have his swim to-morrow morning, but I shall take very good care that he is watched. You may go to bed with an easy heart, and don’t think about that letter. It will not be needed, for he will come to no harm.”

The man thanked me civilly and withdrew, considerably relieved in his mind by his interview with me. Then I sat myself down to think the matter out. What was I to do? Doubtless the Don was an experienced duellist, while Glenbarth, though a very fair shot with a rifle or fowling-piece, would have no chance against him with the pistol or the sword. It was by no means an enviable position for a man to be placed in, and I fully realized my responsibility in the matter. I felt that I needed help, but to whom should I apply for it? The Dean would be worse than useless; while to go to the Don and to ask him to sacrifice his honour to our friendship for Glenbarth would be to run the risk of being shown the door. Then I thought of Nikola, and made up my mind to go to him at once. Since the Duke had spoken of leaving the hotel early in the morning, there could be no doubt as to the hour of the meeting. In that case there was no time to be lost. I thereupon went to explain matters to my wife.

“I had a suspicion that this would happen,” she said, when she had heard me out. “Oh, Dick! you must stop it without fail. I should never forgive myself if anything were to happen to him while he is our guest. Go to Doctor Nikola at once and tell him everything, and implore him to help us as he has helped us before.”

Thus encouraged, I left her, and went back to my dressing-room to complete my attire. This done I descended to the hall to endeavour to obtain a gondola. Good fortune favoured me, for the American party who had but lately arrived at the hotel, had just returned from the theatre. I engaged the man who had brought them, and told him to take me to the Palace Revecce with all possible speed.

“It’s a late hour, Senor,” he replied, “and I’d rather go anywhere than to that house in the Rio del Consiglio.”

“You will be well paid for your trouble and also for your fear,” I replied as I got into the boat.

Next moment we were on our way. A light was burning in Nikola’s room as we drew up at the palace steps. I bade the gondolier wait for me, and to ensure his doing so, refused to pay him until my return. Then I rang the bell, and was rewarded in a few minutes by hearing Nikola’s footsteps on the flag-stones of the courtyard. When the door opened he was vastly surprised at seeing me; he soon recovered his equilibrium, however. It took more than a small surprise to upset Nikola. He invited me to enter.

“I hope there is nothing wrong,” he said politely. “Otherwise how am I to account for this late call?”

“Something is very wrong indeed,” I said. “I have come to consult you, and to ask for your assistance.”

By this time he had reached his own room — that horrible room I remembered so well.

“The fact of the matter is,” I said, seating myself in the chair he offered me as I spoke, “the Duke of Glenbarth and Don de Martinos have arranged to fight a duel soon after daybreak.”

“To fight a duel?” Nikola repeated. “So it has come to this, has it? Well, what do you want me to do?”

“Surely it is needless for me to say,” I replied. “I want you to help me to stop it. You like the Duke, I know. Surely you will not allow that brave young life to be sacrificed by that Spaniard?”

“From the way you speak it would appear that *you* do not care for Martinos?” Nikola replied.

“I frankly confess that I do not,” I replied. “He was introduced to me by a personal friend, but none of my party care very much for him. And now this new affair only adds to our dislike. He insulted the Duke most unwarrantably in my drawing-room last night, and this duel is the result.”

“Always the same, always the same,” Nikola muttered to himself. “But the end is coming, and his evil deeds will bear their own fruit.” Then turning to me, he said aloud — “Since you wish it, I will help you. Don Josè is a magnificent shot, and he would place a bullet in the Duke’s anatomy wherever he might choose to receive it. The issue would never for one moment be in doubt.”

“But how do you know the Don is such a good shot?” I inquired with considerable surprise, for until the moment that I had introduced them to each other I had no idea that they had ever met.

“I know more about him than you think,” he answered, fixing his glittering eyes upon me. “But now to business. If they fight at daybreak there is not much time to be lost.”

He went to his writing-table at the other side of the room and wrote a few lines on a sheet of note-paper. Placing it in an envelope he inquired whether I had told my gondolier to wait. Upon my answering in the affirmative, he left me and went down-stairs.

“What have you done?” I inquired when he returned.

“I have sent word to an agent I sometimes employ,” he said. “He will keep his eyes open. Now you had better get back to your hotel and to bed. Sleep secure on my promise that the two men shall not fight. When you are called, take the gondola you will find awaiting you outside the hotel, and I will meet you at a certain place. Now let me wish you a good-night.”

He conducted me to the hall below and saw me into the gondola. Then saying something to the gondolier that I did not catch, he bade me adieu, and I returned to the hotel. Punctually at five o’clock I was awakened by a tapping at my bedroom door. I dressed, donned a cloak, for the morning was cold, and descended to the hall. The night watchman informed me that a gondola was awaiting me at the steps, and conducted me to it. Without a word I got in, and the little craft shot out into the canal. We entered a narrow street on the other side, took two or three turnings to right and left, and at last came to a standstill at some steps that I had never noticed before. A tall figure, wrapped in a black cloak, was awaiting us there. It was Nikola! Entering the gondola he took his place at my side. Then once more we set off.

At the same moment, so Nikola informed me, Glenbarth was leaving the hotel.



CHAPTER 66

When I had picked up Nikola we continued our voyage. Dawn was just breaking, and Venice appeared very strange and uncanny in the weird morning light. A cold wind was blowing in from the sea, and when I experienced its sharpness, I could not help feeling thankful that I had the foresight to bring my cloak.

"How do you know where the meeting is to take place?" I asked, after we had been travelling a few minutes.

"Because, when I am unable to find things out for myself, I have agents who can do it for me," he replied. "What would appear difficult, in reality is very simple. To reach the place in question it would be necessary for them to employ gondolas, and for the reason that, as you are aware, there are not many plying in the streets of Venice at such an early hour, it would be incumbent upon them to bespeak them beforehand. A few inquiries among the gondoliers elicited the information I wanted. That point satisfactorily settled, the rest was easy."

"And you think we shall be there in time to prevent the meeting?" I asked.

"We shall be at the rendezvous before they are," he answered. "And I have promised you they shall not fight."

Comforted by this reassuring news, I settled myself down to watch the tortuous thoroughfares through which we were passing. Presently we passed the church of St. Maria del Formosa, and later the Ducal Palace, thence out into the commencement of the Grand Canal itself. It was then that Nikola urged the gondoliers, for we had two, to greater speed. Under their powerful strokes the light little craft sped over the smooth bay, passed the island of St. Giorgio Maggiore, and then turned almost due south. Then I thought of Glenbarth, and wondered what his feelings were at that moment. At last I began to have an inkling of our destination. We were proceeding in the direction of the Lido, and it was upon the sandy beach that separates the lagoons and Venice from the open sea that the duel was to be fought. Presently we landed, and Nikola said something to the gondoliers, who turned their craft and moved slowly away. After walking along the sands for some distance, we hid ourselves at a place where it was possible to see the strip of beach, while we ourselves remained hidden.

"They will not be here before another ten minutes," said Nikola, consulting his watch; "we had a good start of them."

Seating ourselves we awaited their arrival, and while we did so, Nikola talked of the value set upon human life by the inhabitants of different countries. No one was more competent to speak on such a subject than he, for he had seen it in every clime and in every phase. He spoke with a bitterness and a greater scorn for the petty vanities and aims of men than I had ever noticed in him before. Suddenly he stopped, and looking towards the left said —

"If I am not mistaken, the Duke of Glenbarth has arrived."

I looked in the direction indicated, and was able to descry the tall figure of the Duke coming along the sands. A little later two other persons made their appearance and followed him. One was undoubtedly the Don, but who was the third? As they drew closer, I discovered that he was unknown to me; not so to Nikola, however.

"Burmaceda," he said to himself, and there was an ugly sneer upon his face.

The Duke bowed ceremoniously to the two men, and the stranger, having returned his salute, knelt upon the sand, and proceeded to open a box he had brought with him. From it he produced a pair of pistols which he loaded with ostentatious care. This work finished, he took them by their barrels and gave Glenbarth his choice. The Spaniard, I noticed, was dressed entirely in black, not showing a particle of white; the Duke was attired very much as usual. When each had taken a pistol, the stranger measured the distance upon the sands and allotted them their respective positions. By this time I was in such a fever of excitement that Nikola laid his hand upon my arm to restrain me.

"Wait," he whispered. "Have I not pledged you my word that your friend shall not be hurt? Do not interrupt them yet. I have my suspicions, and am anxious to confirm them."

I accordingly waited, but though it was only for a few seconds it seemed to me an eternity. The two men were in position, and the stranger, I gathered, was giving them their final instructions. They were to stand with their faces turned from each other, and at the word of command were to wheel round and fire. In a flash I saw what Nikola had in his mind. The stranger was favouring the Don, for while Glenbarth would have faithfully carried out his portion of the contract, the Spaniard did not turn at all, a fact which his opponent was scarcely likely to become aware of, seeing that he would in all probability have a bullet in his heart before he would have had time to realize the trick that had been played upon him. The stranger had raised his hand above his head, and was about to give the signal, when Nikola sprang from beside me, and in a loud voice called to them to "stop." I rose to my feet at the same instant, and followed him across the sands to where the men stood.

"Put down your pistols, gentlemen," said Nikola in a voice that rang like a trumpet-call. "I forbid the duel. Your Grace, the challenge comes from you, I beg that you will apologize to Don Martinos for having sent it."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," the Duke returned.

On learning this Nikola took him on one side and talked earnestly with him for a few minutes. Then, still with his hand upon the other's arm, he led him back to where we were standing.

"I express my regret for having challenged you," said Glenbarth, but with no good grace.

"I thank you, your Grace," said Nikola. Then turning to the Don, he went on — "And now, Don Martinos, I hope you will apologize to the Duke for the insults that occasioned the challenge."

With an oath the Spaniard vowed that he was the last man to do anything of the kind. He had never apologized to any man in his life, and he was not going to do so now, with more to the same effect. Then Nikola fixed his glittering eyes upon him. His voice, however, when he spoke was as conciliatory as ever.

"To oblige *me* you will do it," he said, and then drawing a little closer to him he murmured something that we could not hear. The effect upon the Don was magical. His face turned a leaden hue, and for a moment I thought he would have fallen, but he recovered his self-possession with an effort, and muttered the apology Nikola had demanded of him.

"I thank you, gentlemen," said Nikola. "Now, with your permission, we will return to the city." Here he wheeled round upon the stranger, and continued:—"This is not the first of these little affairs in which you have played a part. You have been warned before, profit by it, for the time may come when it will be too late. Remember Pietro Sallomi."

I do not know who Pietro Sallomi may have been, but I know that the mere mention of his name was sufficient to take all the swagger out of the stranger. He fell to pieces like a house of cards.

"Now, gentlemen, let us be moving," said Nikola, and taking the Don with him he set off quickly in the direction of the spot where we had disembarked from the gondola. I followed with the Duke.

"My dear boy," I said, as we walked along, "why on earth did you do it? Is your life of so little value to yourself or to your friends, that you try to throw it away in this reckless fashion?"

"I am the most miserable brute on the face of the earth," he replied. "I think it would have been far better for me had I been shot back there."

"Look here, Glenbarth," I said with some anger, "if you talk nonsense in this manner, I shall begin to think that you are not accountable for your actions. What on earth have you to be so unhappy about?"

"You know very well," he answered gloomily.

"You are making yourself miserable because Miss Trevor will not marry you," I said. "You have not asked her, how therefore can you tell?"

"But she seems to prefer Don Martinos," he went on.

"Fiddlesticks!" I answered. "I'm quite certain she hasn't thought of him in that way. Now, I am going to talk plainly to you. I have made up my mind that we leave to-day for Rome. We shall spend a fortnight there, and you should have a fair opportunity of putting the question to Miss Trevor. If you can't do it in that time, well, all I can say is, that you are not the man I took you for. You must remember one thing, however: I'll have no more of this nonsense. It's all very well for a Spanish braggart to go swaggering about the world, endeavouring to put bullets into inoffensive people, but it's not the thing for an English gentleman."

"I'm sorry, Dick. Try to forgive me. You won't tell Lady Hatteras, will you?"

"She knows it already," I answered. "I don't fancy you would get much sympathy from her. Try for a moment to picture what their feelings would have been — mine may be left out of the question — if you had been lying dead on the beach yonder. Think of your relations at home. What would they have said and thought? And for what?"

"Because he insulted me," Glenbarth replied. "Was I to put up with that?"

"You should have treated him with the contempt he merited. But there, do not let us discuss the matter any further. All's well that ends well; and I don't think we shall see much more of the Don."

When we reached the gondolas Nikola took me aside.

"You had better return to the city with the Duke in one," he said; "I will take the Don back in another."

"And what about the other fellow?" I inquired.

"Let him swim if he likes," said Nikola, with a shrug of his shoulders. "By the way, I suppose you saw what took place back yonder?"

I nodded.

"Then say nothing about it," he replied. "Such matters are best kept to one's self."

It was a very sober-minded and reflective young man that sat down to breakfast with us that morning. My wife, seeing how matters stood, laid herself out to be especially kind to him. So affable indeed was she, that Miss Trevor regarded her with considerable surprise. During the meal the journey to Rome was discussed, and it was decided that I should telegraph for our old rooms, and that we should leave Venice at half-past two. This arrangement was duly carried out, and nightfall

saw us well advanced on our journey to the capital. The journey is so well known that I need not attempt to describe it here. Only one incident struck me as remarkable about it. No sooner had we crossed the railway-bridge that unites Venice with the mainland, than Miss Trevor's lethargy, if I may so describe it, suddenly left her. She seemed to be her old self instantly. It was as though she had at last thrown off the load under which she had so long been staggering. She laughed and joked with my wife, teased her father, and was even inclined to be flippant with the head of the family. After the events of the morning the effect upon the Duke was just what was wanted.

In due course we reached Rome, and installed ourselves at our old quarters in the Piazza Barberini. From that moment the time we had allowed ourselves sped by on lightning wings. We seemed scarcely to have got there before it was time to go back to Venice. It was unfortunately necessary for the Dean to return to England, at the end of our stay in Rome, and though it was considerably out of his way, he proposed journeying thither by way of Venice. The change had certainly done his daughter good. She was quite her old self once more, and the listless, preoccupied air that had taken such a hold upon her in Venice had entirely disappeared.

"Make the most of the Eternal City," my wife announced at dinner on the eve of our departure, "for to-morrow morning you will look your last upon it. The dragon who has us in his power has issued his decree, and, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, it changeth not."

"A dragon?" I answered. "You should say the family scapegoat! I protest to you, my dear Dean, that it is most unfair. If it is some disagreeable duty to be performed, then it is by my order; if it is something that will bestow happiness upon another, then it is my lady that gets the credit."

"A very proper arrangement," said my wife, "as I am sure the Dean will agree with me."

"I agree with you in everything," replied the polite old gentleman. "Could I do otherwise?"

"I appeal to the Duke, then. Is it your Grace's opinion that a husband should of necessity take upon himself the properties of a dragon?"

Even that wretched young man would not stand by an old friend.

"I am not going to be drawn into an argument with you," he said. "If Lady Hatteras calls you a dragon, then a dragon you must remain until the end of the chapter, so far as I am concerned."

"Phyllis is always right," answered Miss Trevor unblushingly.

"I give in," I said in mock despair. "If you are all against me, I am undone."

It was a beautiful moonlight night when we rose from dinner, and it was arranged that our last evening in Rome should be spent in a visit to the Colosseum. A carriage was immediately ordered, and when the ladies had wrapped themselves up warmly we set off. To those unfortunate individuals who have not had an opportunity of visiting that ancient structure, I can only justify my incompetency by saying that it would be well-nigh impossible to furnish a description that would give them an adequate idea of the feeling of awe it inspires in one. By moonlight it presents a picture that for solemn grandeur is, to my thinking, without its equal in the world. Pompeii by moonlight suggests reflections. The great square of St. Mark's in Venice seen by the same mellow light is a sight never to be forgotten; but in my humble opinion the Colosseum eclipses them all. We entered it and stood in the great ring looking up at the tiers of seats, and recalling its Past. The Dean was profoundly impressed, and spoke of the men who had given up their lives in martyrdom within those great walls.

"How many of the crowd gathered here to witness the agony of the tortured Christians," he said, "believed that the very religion which they so heartily despised was destined to sway the world, and to see the mighty Colosseum and the mightier Power that built it, a ruin? It is a wonderful thought."

After the Dean's speech we crossed to a spot where a better view was obtainable. It was only then that we discovered that the Duke and Miss Trevor were not of our party. When, however, it was time to return they emerged from the shadow and followed us out. Both were unusually silent, and my wife, putting two and two together in her own fashion, came to the conclusion that they had quarrelled. When, later on, the Duke and I were alone together, and the ladies and the Dean had retired to their respective rooms, I was about to take him to task when he stopped me.

"Dick, old man," he said with a solemnity that could not have been greater had he been telling me of some great tragedy, "I want you to give me your congratulations. Miss Trevor has consented to become my wife."

I was so surprised that I scarcely knew what to do or say.

“Good gracious, man! — then why are you so downcast?” I replied. “I had made up my mind that she had refused you!”

“I am far from being downcast,” he said as solemnly as before. “I am the happiest man in the world. Can’t you understand how I feel? Somehow — now that it is over, and I have won her — it seems so great a thing that it almost overwhelms me. You don’t know, Dick, how proud I am that she should have taken me!”

“And so you ought to be,” I said enthusiastically. “You’ll have a splendid wife, and I know you’ll make a good husband.”

“I don’t deserve it, Dick,” he continued in humiliating self-abasement. “She is too good for me, much too good.”

“I remember that I said the same thing myself,” I replied. “Come to me in five years’ time and let me hear what you have to say then.”

“Confound you,” he answered; “why do you talk like that?”

“Because it’s the way of the world, my lad,” I answered. “But there, you’ll learn all for yourself soon enough. Now let me order a whisky-and-potash for you, and then off you go to bed.”

“A whisky-and-potash?” he cried, with horror depicted on his face. “Do you think I’m going to drink whisky on the night that she has accepted me? You must be mad.”

“Well, have your own way,” I answered. “For my own part, I have no such scruples. I have been married too long.”

I rang the bell, and, when my refreshment was brought to me, drank it slowly, as became a philosopher.

It would appear that Miss Trevor had already told my wife, for I was destined to listen to a considerable amount of information concerning it before I was allowed to close my eyes that night.

“I always said that they were suited to each other,” she observed. “She will make an ideal Duchess, and I think he may consider himself a very lucky fellow. What did he say about it?”

“He admitted that he was not nearly good enough for her.”

“That was nice of him. And what did you say?”

“I told him to come to me in five years’ time and let me hear what he had to say then,” I answered with a yawn.

I had an idea that I should get into trouble over that remark, and I was not mistaken. I was told that it was an unfeeling thing to have said, that it was not the sort of idea to put into a young man’s head at such a time, and that if every one had such a good wife as some other people she could name, they would have reason to thank their good fortune.

“If I am not mistaken, you told me you were not good enough for me when I accepted you,” she retorted. “What do you say now?”

“Exactly what I said then,” I answered diplomatically. “I am not good enough for you. You should have married the Dean.”

“Don’t be absurd. The Dean is a dear old thing, but is old enough to be my father.”

“He will be Glenbarth’s father-in-law directly,” I said with a chuckle, “and then that young man will have to drink his claret and listen to his sermons. In consideration of that I will forgive him all his sins against me.”

Then I fell asleep, to dream that I was a rival of St. George chasing a dragon over the seats of the Colosseum; to find, when I had run him to earth, that he had assumed human shape, and was no other than my old friend the Dean of Bedminster.

Next morning the young couple’s behaviour at breakfast was circumspection itself. The worthy old Dean ate his breakfast unconscious of the shell that was to be dropped into his camp an hour later, while my wife purred approval over the teapot. Meanwhile I wondered what Nikola would have to say when he heard of the engagement. After the meal was over we left the Duke and Dean together. Somehow, I don’t think Glenbarth was exactly at his ease, but when he reappeared half-an-hour later and shook me by the hand, he vowed that the old gentleman was the biggest trump in the world, and that I was the next. From this I gathered that the matter had been satisfactorily settled, and that, so far as parental consent was concerned, Miss Gertrude Trevor was likely to become the Duchess of Glenbarth without any unnecessary delay. Though there was not much time to spare before our train started, there was still sufficient for the lovers to make a journey to the Piazza di Trevi, where a magnificent diamond ring was purchased to celebrate the engagement. A bracelet that would have made any woman’s mouth water was also dedicated to the same purpose. A memorial bracelet on the Etruscan model was next purchased for my wife, and was handed to her later on by her grateful friends.

"You did so much for us," said the Duke simply, when Miss Trevor made the presentation.

My lady thereupon kissed Miss Trevor and thanked the Duke, while I looked on in amazement.

"Come, now," I said, "I call that scarcely fair. Is the poor dragon to receive nothing? I was under the impression that I had done more than any one to bring about this happy result."

"You shall have our gratitude," Miss Trevor replied. "That would be so nice, wouldn't it?"

"We'll see what the Duke says in five years," I answered, and with this Parthian shot I left them.

Next morning we reached Venice. The journey had been a very pleasant one, but I must say that I was not sorry when it was over. The picture of two young lovers, gazing with devotion into each other's eyes hour after hour, is apt to pall upon one. We had left Mestre behind us, and were approaching the bridge I have described before as connecting Venice with the mainland, when I noticed that Gertrude Trevor had suddenly become silent and preoccupied. She had a headache, she declared to my wife, but thought it would soon pass off. On reaching the railway-station we chartered a barca to take us to our hotel. When we reached it, Galaghetti was on the steps to receive us. His honest face beamed with satisfaction, and the compliments he paid my wife when she set foot upon the steps, were such as to cover her with confusion. I directed my party to go up-stairs, and then drew the old man on one side.

"Don Josè de Martinos?" I asked, knowing that it was sufficient merely to mention his name.

"He is gone, my lord," Galaghetti replied. "Since he was a friend of yours, I am sorry I could keep him no longer. Perhaps your lordship does not know that he has gambled all his money away, and that he has not even enough left to discharge his indebtedness to me."

"I certainly did not know it," I replied. "And I am sorry to hear it. Where is he now?"

"I could not say," Galaghetti replied. "But doubtless I could find out if your lordship desires to know."

"You need not do that," I answered. "I merely asked out of curiosity. Don Martinos was no friend of mine."

Then, bidding him good-day, I made my way up-stairs, turning over in my mind what I had heard. I was not at all surprised to hear that the Don had come to grief, though I had not expected that the catastrophe would happen in so short a time. It was satisfactory to know, however, that in all probability he would never trouble us again.

That afternoon, according to custom, we spent an hour at Florian's *café*. The Duke and Gertrude strolled up and down, while my wife drew my attention to their happiness. I had on several occasions sang Glenbarth's praises to the Dean, and as a result the old gentleman was charmed with his future son-in-law, and seemed to think that the summit of his ambition had been achieved. During our sojourn on the piazza I kept my eyes open, for I was in hopes of seeing Nikola, but I saw nothing of him. If I was not successful in that way, however, I was more so in another. I had found a budget of letters awaiting me on my return from Rome, and as two of them necessitated my sending telegrams to England, I allowed the rest of the party to return to hotel by boat, while I made my way to the telegraph-office. Having sent them off, I walked on to the Rio del Barcaroli, engaged a gondola there, and was about to step into it, when I became aware of a man watching me. He proved to be none other than the Spaniard, Don Martinos, but so great was the change in him that for a moment I scarcely recognized him. Though only a fortnight had elapsed since I had last seen him, he had shrunk to what was only a shadow of his former self. His face was of a pasty, fishy whiteness, and his eyes had a light in them that I had not seen there before. For the moment I thought he had been drinking, and that his unnatural appearance was the result. Remembering his murderous intention on the morning of the frustrated duel, I felt inclined not to speak to him. My pity, however, got the better of me, and I bade him good-day. He did not return my salutation, however, but looked at me as if I were some one he had seen before, but could not remember where. I then addressed him by name.

In reply he beckoned to me to follow him out of earshot of the gondolier.

"I cannot remember your name," he said, gripping me by the arm, "but I know that I have met you before. I cannot remember anything now because — because —" Here he paused and put his hand to his forehead as if he were in pain. I endeavoured to make him understand who I was, but without success. He shook his head and looked at me, talking for a moment in Italian, then in Spanish, with interludes of English. A more pitiable condition for a man to get into could scarcely be imagined. At last I tried him with a question I thought might have some effect upon him.

"Have you met Doctor Nikola lately?" I inquired.

The effect it produced upon him was instantaneous. He shrunk from me as if he had been struck, and, leaning against

the wall of the house behind him, trembled like an aspen leaf. For a man usually so self-assertive — one might almost say so aggressive — here was a terrible change. I was more than ever at a loss to account for it. He was the last man I should have thought would have been taken in such a way.

“Don’t tell him; you must not tell him, promise me that you will not do so,” he whispered in English. “He would punish me if he knew, and — and —” Here he fell to whimpering like a child who feared chastisement. It was not a pretty exhibition, and I was more shocked by it than I can say. At this juncture I remembered the fact that he was without means, and as my heart had been touched by his pathetic condition, I was anxious to render him such assistance as was in my power. For this reason I endeavoured to press a loan upon him, telling him that he could repay me when things brightened.

“No, no,” he answered, with a flash of his old spirit; then he added in a whisper, “He would know of it!”

“Who would know of it?” I asked.

“Doctor Nikola,” he answered. Then laying his hand upon my arm again, and placing his mouth close to my ear as if he were anxious to make sure that no one else should hear, he went on, “I would rather die of starvation in the streets than fall into his hands. Look at me,” he continued, after a moment’s pause. “Look what I am! I tell you he has got me body and soul. I cannot escape from him. I have no will but his, and he is killing me inch by inch. I have tried to escape, but it is impossible. If I were on the other side of the world and he wanted me I should be obliged to come.” Then with another change as swift as thought he began to defy Nikola, vowing that he *would* go away, and that nothing should ever induce him to see him again. But a moment later he was back in his old condition once more.

“Farewell, Senor,” he whispered. “I must be going. There is no time to lose. He is awaiting me.”

“But you have not told me where you are living now?”

“Cannot you guess?” he answered, still in the same curious voice. “My home is the Palace Revecce in the Rio del Consiglio.”

Here was surprise indeed! The Don had gone to live with Nikola. Was it kindness that had induced the latter to take him in? If not, what were his reasons for so doing?



CHAPTER 67

As may be supposed my meeting with the Don afforded me abundant food for reflection. Was it true, as he had said, that in his hour of distress Nikola had afforded him an asylum? and if so, why was the latter doing so? I knew Nikola too well by this time to doubt that he had some good and sufficient reason for his action. Lurking at the back of my mind was a hideous suspicion that, although I tried my hardest not to think of it, would not allow itself to be banished altogether. I could not but remember the story Nikola had told me on that eventful evening concerning his early life, and the chance remark he had let fall one day that he knew more about the man, Don Martinos, than I supposed, only tended to confirm it. If that were so, and he still cherished, as I had not the least doubt he did — for Nikola was one who never forgave or forgot — the same undying hatred and desire for vengeance against his old enemy, the son of his mother's betrayer, then there was — but here I was compelled to stop. I could not go on. The death-like face of the man I had just left rose before my mind's eye like an accusing angel, whereupon I made a resolution that I would think no more of him nor would I say anything to any member of our party concerning my meeting with him that afternoon. It is superfluous to remark that the latter resolve was more easily kept than the former.

The first dinner in Venice after our return was far from being a success. Miss Gertrude's headache, instead of leaving her, had become so bad that she was compelled to go forthwith to bed, leaving Glenbarth in despair, and the rest of our party as low-spirited as possible. Next morning she declared she was a little better, though she complained of having passed a wretched night.

"I had such horrible dreams," she told my wife, "that when I woke up I scarcely dared close my eyes again."

"I cannot remember quite what she said she dreamt," said Phyllis when she told me the story; "but I know that it had something to do with Doctor Nikola and his dreadful house, and that it frightened her terribly."

The girl certainly looked pale and haggard, and not a bit like the happy creature who had stepped into the train at Rome.

"Heaven grant that there is not more trouble ahead," I said to myself, as I smoked my pipe and thought over the matter. "I am beginning to wish we had not come to Venice at all. In that case we should not have seen Nikola or the Don, Miss Trevor would not have been in this state, and I should not have been haunted day and night with this horrible suspicion of foul play."

It was no use, however, talking of what might or might not have happened. It was sufficient that the things I have narrated *had* come to pass, and I must endeavour to derive what satisfaction I could from the reflection that I had done all that was possible under the circumstances.

On the day following our return to Venice, the Dean of Bedminster set off for England. I fancy he was sorry to go, and of one thing I am quite sure, and that was that we regretted losing him. It was arranged that, as soon as we returned to England, we should pay him a visit at Bedminster, and that the Duke should accompany us. Transparently honest though he was in all things, I fancy the old gentleman had a touch of vanity in his composition, and I could quite understand that he would be anxious to show off his future son-in-law before the society of his quiet cathedral town.

On the night following his departure, I had the most terrible dream I have had in my life. Though some time has elapsed since then, I can still recall the fright it gave me. My wife declares that she could see the effect of it upon my face for more than a day afterwards. But this, I think, is going a little too far. I am willing, however, to admit that it made a very great impression upon me at the time — the more so for the reason that it touched my thought, and I was quite at a loss to understand it. It was night, I remember, and I had just entered the Palace Revecce. I must have been invisible, for, though I stood in the room with Nikola, he did not appear to be aware of my presence. As usual he was at work upon some of his chemical experiments. Then I looked at his face, and saw that it wore an expression that I had never seen there before. I can describe it best by saying that it was one of absolute cruelty, unrelieved by even the smallest gleam of pity. And yet it was not cruelty in the accepted meaning of the word, so much as an overwhelming desire to punish and avenge. I am quite aware, on reading over what I have just written, that my inability to convey the exact impression renders my meaning obscure. Yet I can do no more. It was a look beyond the power of my pen to describe. Presently he put down the glass he held in his hand, and looked up with his head a little on one side, as if he were listening for some sound in the adjoining

room. There was a shuffling footstep in the corridor outside, and then the door opened and there entered a figure so awful that I shrank back from it appalled. It was Don Martinos, and yet it was not the Don. The face and the height were perhaps the same, but the man himself was — oh, so different. On seeing Nikola he shambled forward, rather than walked, and dropped in a heap at his feet, clutching at his knees, and making a feeble whining noise, not unlike that of an animal in pain.

“Get up,” said Nikola sternly, and as he said it he pointed to a couch on the further side of the room.

The man went and stretched himself out upon it as if in obedience to some unspoken command. Nikola followed him, and having exposed the other's chest, took from the table what looked like a hypodermic syringe, filled it from one of the graduated glasses upon the table, and injected the contents beneath the prostrate man's skin. An immediate and violent fit of trembling was the result, followed by awful contortions of the face. Then suddenly he stiffened himself out and lay like one dead. Taking his watch from his pocket Nikola made a careful note of the time. So vivid was my dream that I can even remember hearing the ticking of the watch. Minute after minute went by, until at last the Don opened his eyes. Then I realized that the man was no longer a human being, but an animal. He uttered horrible noises in his throat, that were not unlike the short, sharp bark of a wolf, and when Nikola bade him move he crawled upon the floor like a dog. After that he retreated to a corner, where he crouched and glowered upon his master, as if he were prepared at any moment to spring upon him and drag him down. As one throws a bone to a dog so did Nikola toss him food. He devoured it ravenously, as would a starving cur. There was foam at the corners of his mouth, and the light of madness in his eyes. Nikola returned to the table and began to pour some liquid into a glass. So busily occupied was he, that he did not see the thing, I cannot call it

a man, in the corner, get on to his feet. He had taken up a small tube and was stirring the contents of the glass with it, when the other was less than a couple of feet from him. I tried to warn him of his danger, only to find that I could not utter a word. Then the object sprang upon him and clawed at his throat. He turned, and, a moment later, the madman was lying, whining feebly, upon the floor, and Nikola was wiping the blood from a scratch on the left-hand side of his throat. At that moment I awoke to find myself sitting up in bed, with the perspiration streaming down my face.

"I have had such an awful dream!" I said, in answer to my wife's startled inquiry as to what was the matter. "I don't know that I have ever been so frightened before."

"You are trembling now," said my wife. "Try not to think of it, dear. Remember it was only a dream."

That it was something more than a mere dream I felt certain. It was so complete and dovetailed so exactly with my horrible suspicions that I could not altogether consign it to the realms of fancy. Fearing a repetition if I attempted to go to sleep again, I switched on the electric light and endeavoured to interest myself in a book, but it was of no use. The face of the poor brute I had seen crouching in the corner haunted me continually, and would not be dispelled. Never in my life before had I been so thankful to see the dawn. At breakfast my wife commented upon my dream. Miss Trevor, however, said nothing. She became quieter and more distracted every day. Towards the evening Glenbarth spoke to me concerning her.

"I don't know what to make of it all," he said anxiously. "She assures me that she is perfectly well and happy, but seeing the condition she is in, I can scarcely believe that. It is as much as I can do to get a word out of her. If I didn't know that she loves me I should begin to imagine that she regretted having promised to be my wife."

"I don't think you need be afraid of that," I answered. "One has only to look at her face to see how deeply attached she is to you. The truth of the whole matter is, my dear fellow, I have come to the conclusion that we have had enough of Venice. Nikola is at the bottom of our troubles, and the sooner we see the last of him the better it will be for all parties concerned."

"Hear, hear, to that," he answered fervently. "Deeply grateful though I am to him for what he did when Gertrude was ill, I can honestly say that I never want to see him again."

At luncheon that day I accordingly broached the subject of our return to England. It was received by my wife and the Duke with unfeigned satisfaction, and by Miss Trevor with what appeared to be approval. It struck me, however, that she did not seem so anxious to leave as I expected she would be. This somewhat puzzled me, but I was not destined to remain very long in ignorance of the reason.

That afternoon I happened to be left alone with her for some little time. We talked for a while on a variety of topics, but I could see all the time that there was something she was desirous of saying to me, though she could not quite make up her mind how to commence. At last she rose, and crossing the room took a chair by my side.

"Sir Richard, I am going to ask a favour of you," she said, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"Let me assure you that it is granted before you ask it," I replied. "Will you tell me what it is?"

"It may appear strange to you," she said, "but I have a conviction, absurd, superstitious, or whatever you may term it, that some great misfortune will befall me if I leave Venice just yet. I am not my own mistress, and must stay. I want you to arrange it."

This was a nice sort of shell to have dropped into one's camp, particularly at such a time and under such circumstances, and I scarcely knew what reply to make.

"But what possible misfortune could befall you?" I asked.

"I cannot say," she replied. "I am only certain that I must remain for a little while longer. You can have no idea what I have suffered lately. Bear with me, Sir Richard." Here she lifted a face of piteous entreaty to me, which I was powerless to resist, adding, "I implore you not to be angry with me."

"Is it likely that I should be angry with you, Miss Gertrude?" I replied. "Why should I be? If you really desire to remain for a little longer there is nothing to prevent it. But you must not allow yourself to become ill again. Believe me it is only your imagination that is playing tricks with you."

"Ah! you do not know everything," she answered. "Every night I have such terrible dreams that I have come to dread going to bed."

I thought of my own dream on the previous night, and could well understand how she felt. After her last remark she was silent for some moments. That there was something still to come, I could see, but what it was I had no more idea than a child. At last she spoke.

"Sir Richard," she said, "would you mind very much if I were to ask you a most important question? I scarcely like to do so, but I know that you are my friend, and that you will give me good advice."

"I will endeavour to do so," I replied. "What is the question you wish to ask me?"

"It is about my engagement," she replied. "You know how good and unselfish the Duke is, and how truly he believes in me. I could not bear to bring trouble upon him, but in love there should be no secrets — nothing should be hidden one from the other. Yet I feel that I am hiding so much — can you understand what I mean?"

"In a great measure," I answered, "but I should like to do so thoroughly. Miss Gertrude, if I may hazard a guess, I should say that you have been dreaming about Doctor Nikola again?"

"Yes," she answered after a moment's hesitation. "Absurd though it may be, I can think of no one else. He weighs upon my spirits like lead, and yet I know that I should be grateful to him for all he did for me when I was so ill. But for him I should not be alive now."

"I am afraid that you have been allowing the thought of your recent danger to lie too heavily upon your mind," I continued. "Remember that this is the nineteenth century, and that there are no such things as you think Nikola would have you believe."

"When I know that there are?" she asked, looking at me reproachfully. "Ah, Sir Richard," she continued, "if you knew all that I do you would pity me. But no one will ever know, and I cannot tell them. But one thing is quite certain. I must stay in Venice for the present — happen what may. Something tells me so, day and night. And when I think of the Duke my heart well-nigh breaks for fear I should bring trouble upon him."

I did my best to comfort her; promised that if she really desired to remain in Venice I would arrange it for her, and by so doing committed myself to a policy that I very well knew, when I came to consider it later, was not expedient, and very far from being judicious. Regarded seriously in a sober commonplace light, the whole affair seems too absurd, and yet at the time nothing could possibly have been more real or earnest. When she had heard me out, she thanked me very prettily for the interest I had taken, and then with a little sigh, that went to my heart, left the room. Later in the afternoon I broke the news to my wife, and told her of the promise I had given Gertrude.

"But what does it all mean, Dick?" she asked, looking at me with startled eyes. "What is it she fears will happen if she goes away from Venice?"

"That is what I cannot get her to say," I replied. "Indeed I am not altogether certain that she knows herself. It's a most perplexing business, and I wish to goodness I had never had anything to do with it. The better plan, I think, would be to humour her, keep her as cheerful as we can, and when the proper time arrives, get her away from Venice and home to England as quickly as we can."

My wife agreed with me on this point, and our course of action was thereupon settled.

Later in the afternoon I made a resolution. My own suspicions concerning the wretched Martinos were growing so intolerable that I could bear them no longer. The memory of the dream I had had on the previous night was never absent from my thoughts, and I felt that unless I could set matters right once and for all, and convince myself that they were not as I suspected with Anstruther's friend, I should be unable to close my eyes when next I went to bed. For this reason I determined to set off to the Palace Revecce at once, and to have an interview with Nikola in the hope of being able to extort some information from him.

"Perhaps after all," I argued, "I am worrying myself unnecessarily. There may be no connection between Martinos and that South American."

I determined, however, to set the matter at rest that afternoon. Accordingly at four o'clock I made an excuse and departed for the Rio del Consiglio.

It was a dark, cloudy afternoon, and the house, as I approached it, looked drearier, if such a thing were possible, than I had ever seen it. I disembarked from my gondola at the steps, and having bade the man wait for me, which he did on the other side of the street, I rang the bell. The same old servant whom I remembered having seen on a previous occasion answered it, and informed me that his master was not at home, but that he expected him every minute. I determined to

wait for him and ascended the stairs to his room. The windows were open, and from where I stood I could watch the gondolier placidly eating his bread and onions on the other side of the street. So far as I could see there was no change in the room itself. The centre table as usual was littered with papers and books, that near the window was covered with chemical apparatus, while the old black cat was fast asleep upon the couch on the other side. The oriental rug, described in another place, covered the ominous trap-door so that no portion of it could be seen. I was still standing at the window looking down upon the canal below, when the door at the further end softly opened and a face looked in at me. Good heavens! I can even now feel the horror which swept over me. It was the countenance of Don Martinos, but so changed, even from what it had been when I had seen him in the Rio del Barcaroli, that I scarcely recognized it. It was like the face of an animal and of a madman, if such could be combined. He looked at me and then withdrew, closing the door behind him, only to re-open it a few moments later. Having apparently made sure that I was alone, he crept in, and, crossing the room, approached me. For a moment I was at a loss how to act. I was not afraid that the poor wretch might do me any mischief, but my whole being shrank from him with a physical revulsion beyond all description in words. I can understand now something of the dislike my wife and the Duke declared they entertained for him. On tip-toe, with his finger to his lips, as if to enjoin silence, he crept towards me, muttering something in Spanish that I could not understand; then in English he continued —

“Hush, Senor, cannot you see them?”

He pointed his hand in various directions as if he could see the figures of men and women moving about the apartment. Once he bowed low as if to some imaginary dignitary, drawing back at the same time, as if to permit him to pass. Then turning to me he continued, “Do you know who that is? No! Then I will tell you. Senor, that is the most noble Admiral Revecce, the owner of this house.”

Then for a short time he stood silent, picking feebly at his fingers and regarding me ever and anon from the corner of his eye. Suddenly there was a sharp quick step in the corridor outside, the handle of the door turned, and Nikola entered the room. As his glance fell upon the wretched being at my side a look not unlike that I had seen in my dream flashed into his countenance. It was gone again, however, as suddenly as it had come, and he was advancing to greet me with all his old politeness. It was then that the folly of my errand was borne in upon me. Even if my suspicions were correct what could I do, and what chance could I hope to have of being able to induce Nikola to confide in me? Meanwhile he had pointed to the door, and Martinos, trembling in every limb, was slinking towards it like a whipped hound. At that moment I made a discovery that I confess came near to depriving me of my presence of mind altogether. You can judge of its value for yourself when I say, that extending to the lobe of Nikola’s left ear half-way down and across his throat was a newly-made scar, just such an one, in fact, as would be made by a hand with sharp finger-nails clutching at it. Could my dream have been true, after all?

“I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see you, my dear Sir Richard,” said Nikola as he seated himself. “I understood that you had returned to Venice.”

Having out-grown the desire to learn how Nikola had become aware of anything, I merely agreed that we had returned, and then took the chair he offered me.

When all the circumstances are taken into consideration, I really think that that moment was certainly the most embarrassing of my life. Nikola’s eyes were fixed steadily upon mine, and I could see in them what was almost an expression of malicious amusement. As usual he was making capital out of my awkwardness, and as I knew that I could do no good, I felt that there was nothing for it but for me to submit. Then the miserable Spaniard’s face rose before my mind’s eye, and I felt that I could not abandon him, without an effort, to what I knew would be his fate. Nikola brought me up to the mark even quicker than I expected.

“It is very plain,” he said, with a satirical smile playing round his thin lips, “that you have come with the intention of saying something important to me. What is it?”

At this I rose from my chair and went across the room to where he was sitting. Placing my hand upon his shoulder I looked down into his face, took courage, and began.

“Doctor Nikola,” I said, “you and I have known each other for many years now. We have seen some strange things together, one of us perhaps less willingly than the other. But I venture to think, however, that we have never stood on stranger or more dangerous ground than we do to-night.”

"I am afraid I am scarcely able to follow your meaning," he replied.

I knew that this was not the case, but I was equally convinced that to argue the question with him would be worse than useless.

"Do you remember the night on which you told me that story concerning the woman who lived in this house, who was betrayed by the Spaniard, and who died on that Spanish island?" I asked.

He rose hurriedly from his chair and went to the window. I heard him catch his breath, and knew that I had moved him at last.

"What of it?" he inquired, turning on me sharply as he spoke.

"Only that I have come to see you concerning the *dénouement* of that story," I answered. "I have come because I cannot possibly stay away. You have no idea how deeply I have been thinking over this matter. Do you think I cannot see through it and read between the lines? You told it to me because in some inscrutable fashion of your own you had become aware that Don Martinos would bring a letter of introduction to me from my friend Anstruther. Remember it was I who introduced him to you! Do you think that I did not notice the expression that came into your face whenever you looked at him? Later my suspicions were aroused. The Don was a Spaniard, he was rich, and he had made the mistake of admitting that while he had been in Chili he had never been in Equinata. You persuaded me to bring him to this house, and here you obtained your first influence over him."

"My dear Hatteras," said Nikola, "you are presupposing a great deal. And you get beyond my depth. Don't you think it would be wiser if you were to stick to plain facts?"

"My suppositions are stronger than my facts," I answered. "You laid yourself out to meet him, and your influence over him became greater every day. It could be seen in his face. He was fascinated, and could not escape. Then he began to gamble, and found his money slipping through his fingers like water through a sieve."

"You have come to the conclusion, then, that I am responsible for that also?"

"I do not say that it was your doing exactly," I said, gathering courage from the calmness of his manner and the attention he was giving me. "But it fits in too well with the whole scheme to free you entirely from responsibility. Then look at the change that began to come over the man himself. His faculties were leaving him one by one, being wiped out, just as a school-boy wipes his lesson from a slate. If he had been an old man I should have said that it was the commencement of his second childhood; but he is still a comparatively young man."

"You forget that while he had been gambling he had also been drinking heavily. May not debauchery tell its own tale?"

"It is not debauchery that has brought about this terrible change. Who knows that better than yourself? After the duel, which you providentially prevented, we went to Rome for a fortnight. On the afternoon of our return I met him near the telegraph-office. At first glance I scarcely recognized him, so terrible was the change in his appearance. If ever a poor wretch was on the verge of idiotcy he was that one. Moreover, he informed me that he was living with you. Why should the fact that he was so doing produce such a result? I cannot say! I dare not try to understand it! But, for pity's sake, Nikola, by all you hold dear I implore you to solve the riddle. Last night I had a dream!"

"You are perhaps a believer in dreams?" he remarked very quietly, as if the question scarcely interested him.

"This dream was of a description such as I have never had in my life before," I answered, disregarding the sneer, and then told it to him, increasing rather than lessening the abominable details. He heard me out without moving a muscle of his face, and it was only when I had reached the climax and paused that he spoke.

"This is a strange rigmarole you tell me," he said. "Fortunately you confess that it was only a dream."

"Doctor Nikola," I cried, "it was more than a dream. To prove it, let me ask you how you received that long scratch that shows upon your neck and throat?"

I pointed my finger at it, but Nikola returned my gaze still without a flicker of his eyelids.

"What if I do admit it?" he began. "What if your dream were correct? What difference would it make?"

I looked at him in amazement. To tell the truth I was more astonished by his admission of the correctness of my suspicions than I should have been had he denied them altogether. As it was, I was too much overcome to be able to answer him for a few moments.

"Come," he said, "answer my question. What if I do admit the truth of all you say?"

"You confess then that the whole business has been one long scheme to entrap this wretched man, and to get him into your power?"

"'Tis," he answered, still keeping his eyes fixed upon me. "You see I am candid! Go on!"

My brain began to reel under the strain placed upon it. Since he had owned to it, what was I to do? What could I say?

"Sir Richard Hatteras," said Nikola, approaching a little nearer to me, resting one hand upon the table and speaking very impressively, "I wonder if it has struck you that you are a brave man to come to me to-day and to say this to me? In the whole circle of the men I know I may declare with truth that I am not aware of one other who would do so much. What is this man to you that you should befriend him? He would have robbed you of your dearest friend without a second thought, as he would rob you of your wife if the idea occurred to him. He is without bowels of compassion; the blood of thousands stains his hands and cries aloud for vengeance. He is a fugitive from justice, a thief, a liar, and a traitor to the country he swore to govern as an honest man. On a certain little island on the other side of the world there is a lonely churchyard, and in that churchyard a still lonelier grave. In it lies the body of a woman — my mother. In this very room that woman was betrayed by his father. So in this room also shall that betrayal be avenged. I have waited all my life; the opportunity has been long in coming. Now, however, it has arrived, and I am decreed by Fate to be the instrument of Vengeance!"

I am a tall man, but as he said this Nikola seemed to tower over me, his face set hard as a rock, his eyes blazing like living coals, and his voice trembling under the influence of his passion. Little by little I was growing to think as he did, and to look upon Martinos as he saw him.

"But this cannot go — it cannot go on," I repeated, in a last feeble protest against the horror of the thing. "Surely you could not find it in your heart to treat a fellow-creature so?"

"He is no fellow-creature of yours or mine," Nikola retorted sternly, as if he were rebuking a childish mistake. "Would you call the man who shot down those innocent young men of Equinata, before their mothers' eyes, a fellow-creature? Is it possible that the son of the man who so cruelly wronged and betrayed the trusting woman he first saw in this room, who led her across the seas to desert her, and to send her to her grave, could be called a man? I will give you one more instance of his barbarity."

So saying, he threw off the black velvet coat he was wearing, and drawing up his right shirt-sleeve, bade me examine his arm. I saw that from the shoulder to the elbow it was covered with the scars of old wounds, strange white marks, in pairs, and each about half-an-inch long.

"Those scars," he went on, "were made by his orders, and with hot pincers, when I was a boy. And as his negro servants made them he laughed and taunted me with my mother's shame. No! No! This is no man — rather a dangerous animal, that were best out of the way. It has been told me that you and I shall only meet twice more. Let those meetings lead you to think better of me. The time is not far distant when I must leave the world! When that hour arrives there is a lonely monastery in a range of eastern mountains, upon which no Englishman has ever set his foot. Of that monastery I shall become an inmate. No one outside its walls will ever look upon my face again. There I shall work out my Destiny, and, if I have sinned, be sure I shall receive my punishment at those hands that alone can bestow it. Now leave me!"

God help me for the coward I am, but the fact remains that I left him without another word.



CHAPTER 68

If I were offered my heart's desire in return for so doing, I could not tell you how I got home after my interview with Nikola at the Palace Revecce. I was unconscious of everything save that I had gone to Nikola's house in the hope of being able to save the life of a man, whom I had the best of reasons for hating, and that at the last moment I had turned coward and fled the field. No humiliation could have been more complete. Nikola had won a victory, and I knew it, and despaired of retrieving it. On reaching the hotel I was about to disembark from my gondola, when a voice hailed me from another craft, proceeding in the direction I had come.

"Dick Hatteras, as I'm a sinner!" it cried. "Don't you know me, Dick?"

I turned to see a face I well remembered smiling at me from the gondola. I immediately bade my own man put me out into the stream, which he did, and presently the two gondolas lay side by side. The man who had hailed me was none other than George Beckworth, a Queensland sugar-planter, with whom I had been on terms of the most intimate friendship in bygone days. And as there was a lady seated beside him, I derived the impression that he had married since I had last seen him.

"This is indeed a surprise," he said, as we shook hands. "By the way, let me introduce you to my wife, Dick." He said this with all the pride of a newly-married man. "My dear, this is my old friend, Dick Hatteras, of whom I have so often spoken to you. What are you doing in Venice, Dick?"

"I have my wife and some friends travelling with me," I answered. "We are staying at Galaggetti's hotel yonder. Cannot you and your wife dine with us to-night?"

"Impossible, I am afraid," he answered. "We sail to-night in the P. and O. boat. Won't you come and dine with us?"

"That is equally impossible," I replied. "We have friends with us. But I should like to see something more of you before you go, and if you will allow me I'll run down after dinner for a chat about old times."

"I shall be delighted," he answered. "Be sure that you do not forget it."

Having assured him that I would not permit it to escape my memory, I bade him "good-bye," and then returned to my hotel. A more fortunate meeting could scarcely have occurred, for now I was furnished with an excellent excuse for leaving my party, and for being alone for a time. Once more I felt that I was a coward for not daring to face my fellow-men. Under the circumstances, however, I knew that it was impossible. I could no more have spent the evening listening to Glenbarth's happy laughter than I could have jumped the Grand Canal. For the time being the society of my fellow-creatures was absolutely distasteful to me. On ascending to my rooms I discovered my wife and the Duke in the drawing-room, and was informed by the latter that Miss Trevor had again been compelled to retire to her room with a severe headache.

"In that case I am afraid you will only be a small party for dinner," I said. "I am going to ask you to excuse me. You have often heard me speak, my dear, of George Beckworth, the Queensland sugar-planter, with whom I used to be on such friendly terms in the old days?"

My wife admitted that she remembered hearing me speak of the gentleman in question.

"Well, he is in Venice," I replied, "and he sails to-night by the P. and O. boat for Colombo. As it is the last time I shall be likely to see him for many years, I feel sure you will not mind my accepting his invitation?"

"Of course not, if the Duke will excuse you," she said, and, when the question was put to him, Glenbarth willingly consented to do so.

I accordingly went to my room to make my toilet. Then, having bade my wife "good-bye," I chartered a gondola and ordered the man to row me to the piazza of Saint Mark. Thence I set off for a walk through the city, caring little in which way I went. It was growing dark by this time, and I knew there was little chance of my being recognized, or of my recognizing any one else. All the time, however, my memory was haunted by the recollection of that room at the Palace Revecce, and of what was in all probability going on in it. My gorge rose at the idea — all my manhood revolted from it. A loathing of Nikola, such as I had never known before, was succeeded by a deathly chill, as I realized how impotent I was to avert the catastrophe. What could I do? To have attempted to stay him in his course would have been worse than useless, while to have appealed to the Authorities would only have had the effect of putting myself in direct opposition to him, and who knew what would happen then? I looked at it from another point of view. Why should I be so anxious to interfere on

the wretched Spaniard's behalf? I had seen his murderous intention on the morning of the frustrated duel; I had heard from Nikola of the assassination of those unfortunate lads in Equinata; moreover, I was well aware that he was a thief, and also a traitor to his country. Why should he not be punished as he deserved, and why should not Nikola be his executioner? I endeavoured to convince myself that this was only fit and proper retribution, but this argument was no more successful than the last had been.

Arguing in this way I walked on and on, turning to right or left, just as the fancy took me. Presently I found myself in a portion of the town into which I had never hitherto penetrated. At the moment of which I am about to write, I was standing in a narrow lane, paved with large stones, having high dismal houses on either hand. Suddenly an old man turned the corner and approached me. As he passed, I saw his face, and recognized an individual to whom Nikola had spoken in the little church on that memorable evening when he had taken us on a tour of inspection through the city. He was visibly agitated, and was moreover in hot haste. For some reason that I cannot explain, nor, I suppose, shall I ever be able to do so, an intense desire to follow him took possession of me. It must have been more than a desire, for I felt that I must go with him whether I wished to or not. I accordingly dived into the house after him, and followed him along the passage and up the rickety flight of stairs that ascended from it. Having attained one floor we continued our ascent; the sounds of voices reached us from the different rooms, but we saw no one. On the second landing the old man paused before a door, opened it very softly, and entered. I followed him, and looked about me. It was a pathetic scene that met my eyes. The room was a poor one, and scantily furnished. A rough table and a narrow bed were its only furniture. On the latter a young man was lying, and kneeling on the floor beside him, holding the thin hands in his own, was no less a person than Doctor Nikola himself. I saw that he was aware of my presence, but he took no more notice of me than if I had not existed.

"You called me too late, my poor Antonio," he said, addressing the old man I had followed. "Nothing can save him now. He was dying when I arrived."

On hearing this the old man fell on his knees beside the bed and burst into a flood of weeping. Nikola placed his hand with a kindly gesture upon the other's shoulder, and at the moment that he did so the man upon the bed expired.

"Do not grieve for him, my friend," said Nikola. "Believe me, it was hopeless from the first. He is better as it is."

Then, with all the gentleness of a woman, he proceeded to comfort the old man, whose only son lay dead upon the bed. I knew no more of the story than what I had seen, nor have I heard more of it since, but I had been permitted to see another side of his character, and one which, in the light of existing circumstances, was not to be denied. He had scarcely finished his kindly offices before there was a heavy step outside, and a black-browed priest entered the room. He looked from Nikola to myself, and then at the dead man upon the bed.

"Farewell, my good Antonio," said Nikola. "Have no fear. Remember that your future is my care."

Then, having said something in an undertone to the priest, he placed his hand upon my arm and led me from the room. When we had left them he murmured in a voice not unlike that in which he had addressed the old man, "Hatteras, this is another lesson. Is it so difficult to learn?"

I do not pretend that I made any answer. We passed down the stairs together, and, when we reached the street, stood for a moment at the house-door.

"You will not be able to understand me," he said; "nevertheless, I tell you that the end is brought nearer by that one scene. It will not be long before it comes now. All things considered, I do not know that I shall regret it."

Then, without another word, he strode away into the darkness, leaving me to place what construction I pleased upon his last speech. For some moments I stood where he had left me, pondering over his words, and then set off in the direction I had come. As may be imagined, I felt even less inclined than before for the happy, jovial party I knew I should find on board the steamer, but I had given my promise, and could not get out of it. When I reached the piazza of St. Mark once more I went to the steps and hailed a gondola, telling the man to take me to the P. and O. vessel then lying at anchor in the harbour. He did so, and I made my way up the accommodation-ladder to the deck above, to find that the passengers in the first saloon had just finished their dinner, and were making their appearance on the promenade deck. I inquired of the steward for Mr. Beckworth, and discovered him in the act of lighting a cigar at the smoking-room door.

He greeted me effusively, and begged me to remain where I was while he went in search of his wife. When she arrived, I found her to be a pretty little woman, with big brown eyes, and a sympathetic manner. She was good enough to say that she had heard such a lot concerning me from her husband, and had always looked forward to making my acquaintance. I

accepted a cigar from Beckworth's case, and we then adjourned to the smoking-room for a long talk together. When we had comfortably installed ourselves, my friend's flow of conversation commenced, and I was made aware of all the principal events that had occurred in Queensland since my departure, was favoured with his opinion of England, which he had never before visited, and was furnished with the details as to how he had met his wife, and of the happy event with which their courtship had been concluded.

"Altogether," he said, "taking one thing with another, I don't know that you'd be able to find a much happier fellow in the world than I am at this moment."

I said I was glad to hear it, and as I did so contrasted his breezy, happy-go-lucky manner with those of certain other people I had been brought in contact with that day. My interview with him must have done me good, for I stayed on, and the hour was consequently late when I left the ship. Indeed, it wanted only a few minutes of eleven o'clock as I went down the accommodation-ladder to the gondola, which I had ordered to come for me at ten.

"Galaghetti's hotel," I said to the man, "and as quickly as you can."

When I had bade my friends "good-bye" and left the ship, I felt comparatively cheerful, but no sooner had the silence of Venice closed in upon me again than all my old despondency returned to me. A foreboding of coming misfortune settled upon me, and do what I would I could not shake it off.

When I reached the hotel I found that my party had retired to rest. My wife was sleeping quietly, and not feeling inclined for bed, and dreading lest if I did go I might be assailed by more dreams of a similar description to that I had had on the previous night, I resolved to go back to the drawing-room and read there for a time. This plan I carried into execution, and taking up a new book in which I was very much interested, seated myself in an easy-chair and determined to peruse it. I found some difficulty, however, in concentrating my attention upon it. My thoughts continually reverted to my interview that afternoon with Nikola, and also to the scene I had witnessed in the poorer quarter after dark. I suppose eventually I must have fallen asleep, for I remember nothing else until I awoke to find myself sitting up and listening to a light step in the corridor outside. I looked at my watch to discover that the time was exactly a quarter to one. In that case, as we monopolized the whole of the corridor, who could it be? In order to find out I went to the door, and softly opened it. A dim light was always left in the passage throughout the night, and by it I was able to see a tall and graceful figure, which I instantly recognized, making for the secondary stairs at the further end. Now these stairs, so I had been given to understand, led to another portion of the hotel into which I had never penetrated. Why, therefore, Miss Trevor was using them at such an hour, and, above all, dressed for going out, I could not for the life of me determine. I could see that, if I was anxious to find out, I must be quick; so, turning swiftly into the room again, I picked up my hat and set off in pursuit. As the sequel will prove, it was, perhaps, as well that I did so.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs she was at the bottom, and was speeding along another passage to the right. At the end of this was a door, the fastenings of which she undid, with an ease and assurance that bewildered me. So certain was she of her whereabouts, and so easily did she manipulate the heavy door, that I felt inclined to believe that she must have used that passage many times before. At last she opened it and passed out into the darkness, drawing it to after her. I had paused to watch her; now I hastened on even faster than before, fearing that, if I were not careful, I might lose her outside. Having passed the door I found myself in a narrow lane, bounded on either side by high walls, and some fifty or sixty yards in extent. The lane, in its turn, opened into a small square, out of which led two or three other narrow streets. She turned to the left and passed down one of these; I followed close upon her heels. Of all the strange experiences to which our stay in Venice had given rise, this was certainly one of the most remarkable. That Gertrude Trevor, the honest English girl, the daughter of a dignitary of the Church and a prospective bishop, should leave her hotel in the middle of the night in order to wander about streets with which she was most imperfectly acquainted, was a mystery I found difficult to solve. When she had crossed a bridge, which spanned a small canal, she once more turned to the left, passed along the footway before a dilapidated palace, and then entered a narrow passage on the right. The buildings hereabouts were all large, and, as a natural consequence, the streets were so dark that I had some difficulty in keeping her in sight. As a matter of fact she had stopped, and I was almost upon her before I became aware of it. Even then she did not seem to realize my presence. She was standing before a small door, which she was endeavouring to push open. At last she succeeded, and without hesitation began to descend some steps inside. Once more I took up the chase, though where we were, and what we were going to do there, I had not the least idea. The small yard in which we found ourselves was stone-paved, and for this reason I wondered that she did not hear my footsteps. It is certain, however, that she did not, for she made for a door I

could just discern on the opposite side to that by which we had entered, without turning her head. It was at this point that I began to wish I had brought a revolver or some weapon with me. When she was about to open the door I have just mentioned, I called her softly by name, and implored her to wait for me, but still she took no notice. Could she be a somnambulist? I asked myself. But if this were so, why had she chosen this particular house? Having passed the door we stood in a second and larger courtyard, and it was then that the whole mystery became apparent to me. *The house to which I had followed her was the Palace Revecce, and she was on her way to Nikola!* But for what reason? Was this a trick of Nikola's, or had her terrible dreams taken such a hold upon her that she was not responsible for her actions? Either alternative was bad enough. Pausing for a moment in the courtyard beside the well, she turned quickly to her right hand and began to ascend the stairs towards that awful room, which, so far as I knew, she had never visited before. When she reached it I scarcely knew how to act. Should I enter behind her and accuse Nikola of having enticed her there, or should I wait outside and overhear what transpired between them? At last I made up my mind to adopt the latter course, and, when she had entered, I accordingly remained outside and waited for her. Through the half-open door I could see Nikola, stooping over what looked like a microscope at a side-table. He looked up as Miss Trevor entered, and uttered a cry of surprise. As I heard this a sigh of relief escaped me, for his action proved to me that her visit had not been anticipated.

"Miss Trevor!" he said, moving forward to greet her, "what does this mean? How did you get here?"

"I have come to you," she faltered, "because I could not remain away. I have come to you that I may beg of you that wretched man's life. Doctor Nikola, I implore you to spare him!"

"My dear young lady," said Nikola, with a softness in his voice that reminded me of that I had heard in the death-chamber a few hours before, "you cannot understand what you are doing. You must let me take you back to your friends. You should not be here at this hour of the night."

"But I was bound to come — don't I tell you I could not remain away? Spare him! Oh! for God's sake, spare him!"

"You do not know what you are asking. You are not yourself to-night."

"I only know that I am thinking of you," she answered. "You must not do it! You are so great, so powerful, that you can afford to forgive. Take my life rather than harm him. I will yield it gladly to save you from this sin."

"To — save — me," I heard him mutter to himself. "She would save me!"

"God would never forgive," she continued, still in the same dreamy voice.

He moved away from her, and from where I stood I could see how agitated he was. For some moments she knelt, looking up at him, with arms outstretched in supplication; then he said something to her in a low voice, which I could not catch. Her answer, however, was plain to me.

"Yes, I have known it always in my dreams," she said.

"And knowing that, you would still wish me to pardon him?"

“In the name of God I would urge you to do so,” she answered. “The safety of your soul depends upon it.”

Once more Nikola turned away and paced the room.

“Are you aware that Sir Richard Hatteras was here on the same errand this afternoon?” he asked.

“I know it,” she replied, though how she could have done so I could not conceive, nor have I been able to do so since.

“And does he know that you have come to me now asking me to forgive?”

“He knows it,” she answered, as before. “He followed me here.”

As she had never looked behind her, how had she known this also?

Then Nikola approached the door and threw it open.

“Come in, Hatteras,” he said. “Your presence is discovered.”

“For heaven’s sake, Nikola, tell me what this means,” I cried, seeing that the girl did not turn towards me. “Is she asleep, or have you brought your diabolical influence upon her?”

“She is not asleep, and yet she is not conscious of her actions,” he answered. “There is something in this that passes our philosophy. Had I any idea that she contemplated such a thing, I would have used every effort to prevent it. Miss Trevor, believe me, you must go home with Sir Richard,” he continued, tenderly raising the girl to her feet as he spoke.

“I cannot go until you have sworn to forgive,” was her reply.

“I must have time to think,” he answered. “In the morning you will know everything. Trust me until then, and remember always that while Nikola lives he will be grateful.”

Then he assisted me to conduct her down-stairs, and across the two courtyards, to the little postern door through which we had entered the palace.

"Have no fear for her," he said, addressing me. "She will go home as she came. And in the morning she will remember nothing of what has transpired."

Then taking her hand in his he raised it to his lips, and a moment later had bade me farewell, and had vanished into the palace once more.

As I tracked her from the hotel, so I followed her back to it again. I was none the less anxious, however. If only Nikola would abandon his purpose, and release his enemy, her action and my anxiety would not be in vain. But would he do so, and in the event of his doing this, would his prophecy that Miss Trevor would, in the morning, remember nothing of what had transpired, prove true?

Turning, twisting as before, we proceeded on our way. My chief fear was that the door through which we had made our exit would be found to be shut on our return. Happily, however, this did not prove to be the case. I saw Miss Trevor enter, and then swiftly followed her. She hastened down the passage, ascended the stairs, passed along the corridor, and made her way to her own room. As soon as I had made certain that she was safely there, I went on to my own dressing-room, and on entering my wife's apartment had the good fortune to find her still asleep. I was still more thankful in the morning when I discovered she had not missed me, and being satisfied on this point, I decided to say nothing whatsoever concerning our adventure.

Miss Trevor was the last to put in an appearance at breakfast, and, as you may suppose, I scanned her face with some anxiety. She looked pale and worn, but it was evident from her manner when she greeted me, that she had not the least idea what she had done during the night. Nikola's promise had proved to be true, and for that reason I was more determined than ever to keep my information to myself. Events could not have turned out more fortunately for all parties concerned.

Shortly after breakfast a letter was handed to me, and, glancing at the writing, I saw that it was from Nikola. I was alone at the time of receiving it, a fact for which I was grateful. I will leave you to imagine with what impatience I opened it. It was short, and merely contained a request that I would call at the Palace Revecce before noon that day, if I could spare the hour. I decided to do so, and I reached the palace twenty minutes or so before the appointed time. The old servitor, who by this time had become familiar with my face, opened the door and permitted me to enter. I inquired if Doctor Nikola were at home, and to my surprise was informed that he was not.

"Perhaps your Excellency would like to see the other Senor?" the old man asked, pointing up the stairs.

I was about to decline this invitation with all possible haste, when a voice I recognized as that of the Don greeted me from the gallery above.

"Won't you come up-stairs, Sir Richard?" it said. "I have a letter for you, from my friend, Doctor Nikola!"

I could scarcely believe the evidence of my eyes and ears, and when I reached the room of which I had such terrible recollections, my surprise was intensified rather than lessened. Martinos had undergone a complete metamorphosis. In outward appearance he was no longer the same person, who only the day before had filled me with such terrible repulsions. If such a thing could be believed, he was more like his old self — as I had first seen him.

"Where is Doctor Nikola?" I inquired, when I had looked round the room and noticed the absence of the chemical paraphernalia, the multitude of books, and the general change in it.

"He went away early this morning," the Don replied. "He left a letter for you, and requested me to give it you as soon as you should call. I have much pleasure in doing so now."

I took it and placed it almost mechanically in my pocket.

"Are you aware when he will return?" I asked.

"He will never do so," Martinos replied. "I heard the old man below wailing this morning, because he had lost the best master he had ever had."

"And you?"

"I am ruined, as you know," he said, without any reference to his illness, "but the good doctor has been good enough to place twenty thousand lira to my credit, and I shall go elsewhere and attempt to double it."

He must have been much better, for he smiled in the old deceitful way as he said this. Remembering what I knew of him, I turned from the man in disgust, and bidding him good-day, left the room which I hoped never to see again as long as I might live. In the courtyard I encountered the old caretaker once more.

"So the Senor Nikola has gone away never to return?" I said.

"That is so, Senor," said the old man with a heavy sigh. "He has left me a rich man, but I do not like to think that I shall never see him again."

Sitting down upon the edge of the well I took from my pocket the letter the Don had handed me.

"Farewell, friend Hatteras," it began. "By the time you receive this I shall have left Venice, never more to set foot in it. We shall not meet again. I go to the Fate which claims me, and of which I told you. Think of me sometimes, and, if it be possible, with kindness,

"Nikola."

I rose and moved towards the door, placing a gold piece in the old man's hand as I passed him. Then, with a last look at the courtyard, I went down the steps and took my place in the gondola, with a feeling of sadness in my heart for the sad Destiny of the most wonderful man I had ever known.



CHAPTER 69

Next day, much to Galaghetti's sorrow, we suddenly brought our stay in Venice to a conclusion, and set off for Paris. The Queen of the Adriatic had lost her charm for us, and for once in our lives we were not sorry to say good-bye to her. The train left the station, crossed the bridge to the mainland, and was presently speeding on her way across Europe. Ever since the morning Miss Trevor's spirits had been steadily improving. She seemed to have become her old self in a few hours, and Glenbarth's delight was beautiful to witness. He had been through a good deal, poor fellow, and deserved some recompense for it. We had been upwards of an hour upon our way, when my wife made a curious remark.

"Good gracious!" she said, "in our hurry to get away we have quite forgotten to say good-bye to Doctor Nikola!"

I saw Miss Trevor give a little shudder.

"Do you know," she said, "I had such a curious dream about him last night. I dreamt that I saw him standing in the courtyard of a great building on a mountain-side. He was dressed in a strange sort of yellow gown, not unlike that worn by the Buddhist priests, and was worn almost to a shadow and looked very old. He approached me, and taking my hands, said something that, in the commonplace light of day, doesn't seem to have much sense in it. But I know it affected me very much at the time."

"What was it?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"It was this," she answered — "*Remember that I have forgiven; it is for you to forget.*" What could he have meant?"

"Since it is only a dream, it is impossible to say," observed my wife, and thus saved me the danger of attempting a solution.

To bring my long narrative to a conclusion I might say that the Duke and Miss Trevor were married last May. They spent their honeymoon yachting to the West Indies. Some one proposed that they should visit Venice; indeed, the Earl of Sellingbourne, who had lately purchased the Palace Revecce, and had furnished it, by the way, from the Tottenham Court Road, placed it at their disposal. From what I have been told I gather that he was somewhat ill-pleased because his offer was not accepted.

When the wind howls round the house at night and the world seems very lonely, I sometimes try to picture a monastery on a mountain-side, and then, in my fancy, I see a yellow-robed, mysterious figure, whose dark, searching eyes look into mine with a light that is no longer of this world. To him I cry —

"FAREWELL, NIKOLA!"



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